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CASTRATI:

The History of an Extraordinary Vocal Phenomenon

and a Case Study of

Handel's Opera Roles for Castrati

Written for the

First Royal Academy of Music (1720-1728)

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Written for the

First Royal Academy of Music (1720-1728)

by

Francisca Paula Vanherle, Master in Vocal Arts

Treatise

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With many thanks
To all members of my committee
For supporting me in my research.

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Dedicated to my parents,
For their wonderful support throughout the years.

On the castrato Sassarelli (Dresden):

"He started the note in the softest pianissimo, as if a tiny silver bell rang. This tone grew incessantly, swelling with ever increasing intensity, prompting the listening congregation to hold their breath, their eyes anxiously directed towards the choir. This magical sound swelled and swelled until it reached an astounding volume, filling the entire church. No one was breathing, the prayers stopped and even the priests turned their heads to the orchestra. Then, the power of this immense resonance, resembling a loud trumpet sound, gradually decreased in nearly unnoticeable degrees, and kept fading until it vanished into thin air."

H. von Mannstein (1711-1765)*

* As quoted by Fritz, H., *Kastratengesang*, Hans Schneider: Tutzing (1994)

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2002

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Castrati were without doubt, an extraordinary phenomenon in the vocal world. Four centuries of history exist from the first evidence of their presence in music, dating from the 1550s, and the death of the last castrato Allessandro Moreschi, in 1922. A tradition almost solely practiced in Italy, the castrati experienced their halcyon days in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. At first, they were recruited and castrated as young boys to sing in the soprano sections of the church choirs. They enjoyed an extensive training in specialized

conservatorios and grew to be the most accomplished vocalists the world had known thus far. Inevitably, their art was noticed by opera composers of the time. They flourished and were celebrated in Italy and abroad. Their vocal technique and artistic skills dictated the *bel canto* style for nearly two hundred years. At the end of the eighteenth century, the growing awareness in moral philosophy, and a series of political shifts in Europe put an end to the overwhelming success of the eunuchs. Yet their influence on opera composition of the time and of the subsequent decades was of immense consequence.

An important question should be raised when performing the opera roles written for castrati nowadays. Who will sing the castrato roles? As a logical solution, women or countertenors should adopt these roles into their repertoire. A study of opera roles written for castrati by a baroque master in the genre, Georg Friedrich Handel, sheds some light on the music for these rare birds. The castrato role-study encompasses Handel's operas written for the First Royal Academy of Music (1720-1728). By disclosing some particular aspects in the music and the drama, it becomes clear what voice type should be singing these roles in present day Handel opera production.

Contents

Introduction

In the course of history, castration has for one reason or another played a part in the customs of many cultures. In China, the eunuchs were the guardians of the Forbidden City. In the Arab world, they tended to the women in the harem. Castration appeared in the Ancient Egyptian, as well as the Greek and Roman mythology. Various religious sects advocated (self-) emasculation as an expiatory sacrifice under the pretext that it provided a purer state of mind and body as it induced a forced sexual abstinence. This particular belief originated in the *Cybele* cult (3rd century AD). It passed on to many other religious splinter groups and even found its way deep into the Christian church, where it assisted in the exacerbation of the Western taboos regarding sexuality. More than often, Christian fanatics preached emasculation to promote chastity. In medieval times, the castration method featured in torture and punishment procedures, especially in cases concerning heresy and sexual misconduct. Yet, the West chiefly identifies the practice with the castrato singers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. On a musical as well as on a social level, their legacy survived in a multitude of documents. Meticulous journals kept by travelers, press reports, theatre records and no less significantly, the musical scores composed for their voices all disclose various aspects of these singers' life.

What are the consequences of childhood castration? Little is known about the psychological effects, but physiologically, there are some unquestionable

facts. The exact biological impact was probably not known at the time. It is likely that the effects were noticed in accidental cases and then copied in deliberate surgery. Males castrated before puberty retain a high voice, they lack secondary sexual characteristics such facial and body hair and they are less likely to grow bald. Due to the hormonal imbalance, they are prone to grow to an exceptional height, especially for the norms of their time. Some, but unfortunately not all, attained an unusual vocal power, range and length of breath. This resulted from an intensive period of musical training, but also from their abnormal physical disposition. The enlarged thoracic cavity combined with an undeveloped larynx allowed an immense rush of air to activate the small vocal chords. In the best cases, the result combined a phenomenal vocal power with the freshness and acute brilliance of a child voice, resonating in a full-grown body.

Undoubtedly, the custom of castration for vocal preservation is one of the most extraordinary episodes in Western music history. The first evidence of the presence of castrati dates from the 1550s. Originally induced by the Vatican, the castration of young boys for musical purposes was a practice uniquely present in Italy. The popes banned women from singing in church and saw in castration a quick and convenient solution to keep the soprano sections of the church choirs occupied. Though the nineteenth century no longer saw castrati appear in opera, the practice was not abandoned until the 1860s, as the Papal Chapel still counted on eunuchs to sing the high parts in the choir. Trained and educated in specialized conservatorios, they grew to be the most accomplished singers the world had known thus far.

The fame and reputation of the castrati was of immense magnitude, comparable to the pop- and film stars of today. Audiences all over Europe were

wildly enthusiastic about the eunuch singers. They represented, on the one hand, the stunning fantasy world of baroque theatre, and on the other, a vocal skillfulness that the world had never encountered before. It is hard to comprehend why this trend became so fashionable, and furthermore, how a blind eye was turned to the practice. In a matter of a few decades, castration became a mere custom in the musical training of young Italian choristers. As the castrato's art was noticed by the opera composers of the time, they also became a constant feature of baroque theatre. As theatre performers, they portrayed male as well as female characters.

In an article dating from the beginning of the twentieth century, Francis Rogers wrote that the reason for the castrato's popularity in Europe was most likely due to an "undeveloped musical taste in art singing".[1] Yet, it is hardly plausible that the reason should be so superficial. At the time, Italy played a leading role in the operatic world and the reputation of its singers was among the highest in Europe. Although the Italian custom of castration was condemned abroad, the opera stars were celebrated everywhere. The vocal art of these Italians was superior to that of any other nation. All singers, and certainly the castrati, reigned both in and out of Italy for nearly two centuries. Many different motives contributed to the supremacy of the male soprano, ranging from a reinforcement of religious conventions to a temporary musical necessity and even an audience's fanatical appetite for these operatic idols.

It is unclear how many castrati were around at any one point. Some estimates say that, at the height of the fashion for castrato singing, several thousands were subjected to the operation per year. Other sources state higher,

[1] F. Rogers, "The Male Soprano", *The Musical Quarterly* (1919) - p. 413

or less substantial numbers. The lack of reliable documents is most likely due to the taboo surrounding the custom. Even within Italy, hardly any city openly admitted to running facilities where the surgery in question could be carried out. It is sure, however, that the practice was widely spread and that the demand for male sopranos was high. The requirement for castrati increased throughout the seventeenth century and grew to a climax in the first half of the eighteenth century with the international triumph of the Italian *opera seria*. Although they were first "designed" to sing in the Italian church and cathedral choirs, the theatre became the main feeding ground for their universal success.

For the modern intellect, to fathom this phenomenon without casting a moral judgment upon the architects of it is almost impossible. John Rosselli urges that it is essential to move away as far a possible from modern principles and assumptions.[2] Trying to identify with the perceptions, mentality and expectations of the baroque church, audience and musical world of that period in time requires a substantial effort for a mind drenched Western Society's current philosophy and ethical standards.

Today, an important question is raised in performance practice. Who will sing the music written for these castrati? For obvious reasons, it is out of the question that the practice of castration for musical purposes should be revived. In the past, editors have attempted to transpose the music for tenors or basses, but this interference with the score never offers favorable results. As a logical solution, women and countertenors should adopt this music into their repertory so that no alteration of the original score is required.

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[2] J. Rosselli, "The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550-1850", *Acta Musiclogica,* Vol. LX (May-August 1988) – pp. 143-77

However, the roles written for castrati are varied. They range from princes and princesses to noble lovers, military leaders, tyrants and even old women. The variety of these characters strongly suggests that the castrato voices occurred in as many timbres, colors and intensities as any other voice type does. The music also portrays very distinctive aspects, depending on the dramatic intensity of the role. Inevitably, this variety in drama and music addresses the question of *Fach.* Should castrato roles be classified in the same way as romantic and twentieth century opera roles are? The answer is yes. Methodical study of this music in order to create a guideline to the repertory will help to revive this music. Moreover, it will encourage performance practice that stays as close as possible to the authenticity of the score.

Composers at that time created most of their music for particular singers. Therefore, a role-study can illuminate the individuality of each singer. Handel wrote profusely for castrati. Except for *Almira* (1704), all his operas contain music intended for male altos or sopranos and many works feature more than one castrato. His work for the Royal Academy of Music (1720-1728) in London encompassed thirteen operas. Handel worked with seven different castrati during the eight years of the Academy; two of them were sopranos, the others were altos. His compositional style clearly varies from one singer to the next. As a true master of *opera seria* and an experienced composer of vocal music, his work reveals much on the individuality of each voice. Although this is but a minute fraction of the repertoire, it is a start in trying to determine how these roles fit into the repertory of female singers and countertenors.

Part I: Castrati in History

The Story of a Unique Vocal Phenomenon

I.1: Reasoning behind Castration for Voice Preservation

A certain obscurity surrounding the world of the castrati makes it hard to uncover whether castration was a solution to a problem that presented itself within the musical organization of the church, or whether the reasoning for cultivating castrati for the choirs became convention after the custom was already established. The ecclesiastic circumstances of those days were obvious: the Church was omnipotent and the pope was entitled to establish laws not only in the clerical institutions, but also as political leader of the Papal States. The Vatican had the upper hand in all affairs concerning the Church and also exercised important international political authority. The tight diplomatic and social connections with the other Italian states could lead to positive influences as well as severe conflicts. It was the Vatican, however, who categorically controlled the laws of the Catholic Church. The example set by Rome was to be followed everywhere. In addition, the Church helped to reinforce a male-dominated society by not allowing women to take part in church music.

In fact, there was a completely ban on women performing in churches. It was considered sinful for a woman to be seen "attracting attention" in public, especially in musical entertainment. Private performances were condoned, but not approved of. The Vatican hardened their case using St. Paul's words in the Bible: "Let women be silent in the assemblies, for it is not permitted for them to speak".[3] They duly interpreted this as "mulier taceat in ecclesia" (women should be silent in church).

Yet the ban did not stop at church singing alone. Pope Sixtus V was one of the first to openly utter ardent disapproval of women performers. In the years 1586-90, he decreed that no woman should act or sing. According to Patrick Barbier, there is reason to believe that women of the theatre did not establish a particularly honorable reputation during the sixteenth century. They had "devoted themselves more to a life of libertinage and debauchery than to the serious exercise of their profession".[4] This reputation did not help their position in society, let alone their already fragile status in theatre life. Of course, though the pope could ban women from performing in church everywhere, he could only prevent them from singing in the theatres in the Papal States.

The Church remained relentlessly opposed to women performers until the arrival of Pope Clement IX (1667-1669). He had written the opera libretto for *La Baldassare o la Comica del Cielo*, set to music by Anton Abbatini. This opera was presented in Rome on seven separate occasions during Clement's pontificate (1668). The pope himself had arranged to have a genuine spectacle with an abundance of stage effects. Although this pope took a much more liberal

[3] Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter XVI, verse 34
[4] P. Barbier, *The World of the Castrati,* Souvenir Press: London (1996) - p. 131

standpoint than his predecessors concerning the performing arts, he still made no real concession to allowing women performers on stage. His successor, Clement X, was somewhat more broadminded. He actually allowed women to sing and dance in the theatre during the seasons of 1669 to 1676 and in particular in the Teatro Tor di Nona. Their appearance proved to be a great success. However, they drew so much attention and became so popular that the following pope, Innocent XI, was infuriated. He was predisposed against the female gender and completely forbade women to perform in any public event, especially when there was an admission charge. He even threatened that castrati who participated in performances with women would be excommunicated from the Church. The Romans were quick, however, to bring in castrati from outside the Papal States, who would not be subjected to the pope's decree. They masked the performances as private affairs at no cost, rather than profitable public events. Innocent's XI's successor, Alexander VIII, only reigned for two years (1689-1691), which was unfortunate. His liberated attitude towards theatre brought a breath of fresh air. The carnival seasons of those years were said to be the wildest and most amusing of the century. The reign of the next pope, Innocent XII, brought the Papal States back to sobriety. He nurtured a fierce hatred against actresses and female singers and firmly reinstated the ban against female performers. This resulted in terrible opposition and hostile demonstrations against him by the art-lovers. The crisis stretched to its climax in 1697, when the Pope ordered the wonderful Teatro Tor di Nona to be knocked down to the ground in front of the piqued Romans.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, with the instatement of Pope Clement XI, an ostensibly compulsive purist, the situation got even worse. He

completely banned women from singing, even in their own home. He declared that it would upset that "modesty which becomes their sex so well".[5] He decreed that no women, married, widowed or spinster, should be taught to sing or act, and he even advised husbands and tutors to never allow any music teachers in a woman's quarters. For a long time, there was little improvement on that matter. Yet, with Clement XIV's enthronement in 1769, the ban that forced theatres to keep the seemingly absurd custom of giving female roles to young boys, men in disguise or castrati, was finally dropped for good. He even went so far as to allow women to perform in churches. This liberating declaration marked the first step towards the end of male domination in religious music. For many decades already, women had been successful opera performers everywhere outside the Papal States, but opening the door for them in church music gave them a complete position in the musical life of the time.

In light of this history, it is hard to believe that the ban on female musicians was a sufficient ground for mass castration of young boys. There had to be a more profound reason, or several ones, for the castrato-craze in Italy, especially since the castrati were also immensely popular outside the Papal States, where women did perform in the theatres. Replacing women with castrati in church was, after all, a problem that could be solved in a different way. There were *falsettists* and child choristers who could sing the high parts, for example. Yet, these vocalists manifested problems as well. *Falsettists* were experienced performers, but they were hard to come by for the really high parts (the alto range suited them better). The boys presented the problem that they only lasted until puberty. First, they took time to train their voice. When they were more or

[5] Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, p. 125 [pp. 123-26: *The Popes and Castration]*

less competent, the voice broke and they had to start training anew. As a young bass or tenor, they were no longer so valuable since the church preferred to employ adult male singers for the lower parts. Besides, the problem of having to cope with young, feeble voices on the top parts remained standing. As a practical matter, the church benefited in every way from castrating boys in order to keep them in the capacity they were trained for from an early age.

Corresponding to the same concept of having the young castrati sing the top parts, the reasons were also of a financial nature. The high parts in music were considered more valuable, more important, since height was related to "heavenly" qualities. In general, soprano singers were paid more than any other singer or musician,[6] in churches as well as in theatre.[7] The church schools, responsible for training the young singers, were burdened with the cost of extra support for the boys by hiring expensive, high voices. The boys usually entered a conservatorio at the age of seven or eight and were expected to stay there for eight to ten years. By castrating the youngsters, the Church assured that their oldest castrati were of high quality by the end of their extensive training. Moreover, having strong voices in the soprano section meant they did not need to hire outside singers to strengthen the sound of the boy choristers. The necessity, or desire, for a big sound might also have been an argument to use castrati, in addition to boys. The voices of the castrati were considerably larger and stronger than those of the young singers. This can be derived from a bull

[6] Rosselli, "The Castrati as a Professional Group" – p. 163

[7] Barbier – p. 127 [Barbier explains that, for example, in Venetian churches, basses and tenors were paid better until the rise of the castrati. He links this salary increase to the castrati's huge success in opera, which led many of them to leave the church in search of fortune on the stage.]

issued by pope Sixtus V in 1589. A passage concerning the setup of the choir at St.-Peter's Basilica, reads as follows:

> "12 singers: four basses, four tenors, and four contraltos, and in addition for the voice which is called soprano, four eunuchs, if skilled ones can be found; if not, six boys. These singers, according to the basilica, shall present at the whole of the day and night office and at Mass, every day." [8]

If there were six boys needed to equal the sound of four castrati, the difference in volume must have been substantial. Furthermore, it was generally accepted that castrati were better singers than boys or women. This opinion was favored as a defense argument by the Sicilian Jesuit Thomas Tamburini (1591-1675). In the defense of castrati versus boys and women, he claims "that eunuchs serve the common good by singing the divine praises more sweetly in churches".[9]

It is noteworthy that there was a specified difference between contralti and castrati. The latter were solely employed to sing the soprano parts. Even though many castrato voices developed into the range of an alto, successive popes forbade that castrati sing alto parts. Those parts could be sung by *falsettists*, i.e. countertenors, who did not need to undergo an operation. This voice specification is, in fact, a little peculiar. At that time, voices were still defined by the position of their part in the score, not by vocal range. Perhaps the notion of the high parts in the music being the most crucial one is the essential issue here. The Church kept their most elite singers for the most "divine" parts of the music; the top range being symbolically closer to heaven. It is quite likely that this helped to inspire the association between castrati and angels, or demi-gods.

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[8] Bull *Cum pro nostro pastorali munere*, 27 September 1589, as quoted by A. Milner, "The Sacred Capons", *The Musical Times*, 114 (March 1973), p. 251

[9] As quoted in Milner - pp. 251-52

There are several reasons for this analogy. To begin with, it has an unmistakable sexual implication. Angels are supposedly "sex-less", so it was easy to see the connection with the castrati, who also had an androgynous quality. Yet, there are aspects of their music, especially the church music, which clearly allude an almost divine atmosphere. For example, as Barbier rightfully points out, it is hard not to think of heavenly creatures when hearing Allegri's astonishing *Miserere*, probably the most famous piece composed for castrati, by a castrato.[10] When they became the stars of Italian opera, the castrati enraptured the audience with their dazzling voices and singing style. Undoubtedly, this further inspired the idea of their analogy with the near-celestial.

Rosselli offers another interesting explanation to the necessity of castrati.[11] The vocal genres of the seventeenth century knew a trend incorporating florid, virtuosic embellishments and freely improvised ornamentations. This new style grew out of the profane madrigal and made its way into the monody of the cantatas and oratorios.[12] This music called for a "new professionalism" in singing. The boys in the conservatorios benefited from a long education concentrating on this style, but the education of girls was hampered by society's pressure on the status of women. They had no chance in competing with boys who studied at the choir schools. So, in addition to the law banning women from performing in public, perhaps the preference for the

[10] Barbier - pp. 128-9
[11] Rosselli, "The Castrati as a Professional Group" - p. 149
[12] Allowing this florid style in church creates a conflict with the ecclesiastic regulations concerning sacred music. According to the Council of Trent (1562-3), religious music should be pronounced plainly and distinctly, and should have nothing profane blended in with it. Yet the music pleased the ears, and gradually, grants were made to allow the florid style to be performed in church.

castrato voice was also in part enhanced by the shortage of schooled female vocalists who could handle the virtuosity of the scores in the new repertoire. Surely, there were many female singers at the courts, but they were mostly born into musical families or artistic surroundings. In these cases, the environment they grew up in might have provided a musical training regardless of their sex. Some famous female performers of the time are, for example, the celebrated *Concerto delle Donne* at Ferrara, the two eminent daughters of Giulio Caccini at the Medici court, Francesca (1587-c.1640) and Settimia (1591-c.1638) and Venetian based composer and singer Barbara Strozzi (1619-c.1664). They were highly accomplished musicians, but their art remained confined as they only performed for a select audience during private appearances at the respective courts and noble houses.

There is one exception to the rule as far as public opera performance goes and it may well be proof that Rosselli's theory holds ground. The Venetian *Ospedali,* equivalent to the conservatorios, were the sole musical centers in Italy to provide training for girls. They enjoyed an elaborate education and were prepared for professional musicianship in the same way the boys were elsewhere in Italy. These girls thrived on the stages of the local theatres. Their success in opera is a unique and fascinating feature of musical life in baroque Venice. Unfortunately, they had a hard time making a career outside the Venetian Republic. It was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that women really claimed their stake in public opera all over Italy, with the exception of the Papal States.[13]

[13] For more information on female singers in Baroque performance, see J. Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera,* Cambridge University Press (1992) [Chapter 3: *Women*]

Though these particular circumstances might have stimulated the use of castrato voices outside of Venice, it is hard to accept them as solid confirmation that castration was an absolute necessity. In the eyes of the Church, castration was acceptable as long as it was in service of the glory of God. There are, however, two grave ambiguities in their making allowances for this practice. The first concerns the position of the Church towards emasculation. Medieval legislation on the subject is summarized in Canon 2345 of the current Code of Canon law:

> "A layman found legally guilty of grave mutilation is *ipso facto* excommunicated and moreover must make good the damage [how that is to be done is not stated]. A cleric shall be punished by an ecclesiastic court according to the degree of his guilt with pennances, censures, privation of office, and even with deposition."[14]

This passage clearly confirms that the Church did not tolerate unnecessary mutilation. The second problem is related to the first, but is in direct contradiction to the words from the Bible:

> "He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord."[15]

How the Church could so blatantly ignore these biblical prescriptions is an extraordinary query. Also, how the practice was overlooked for so long remains an astounding facet in the history of the castrati and the Church. Without a doubt, the latter institution covered the custom up and treated it as a complete taboo. In the nineteenth century, the shame and guilt surrounding this procedure led to a bizarre claim. The officials asserted that only boys who had lost their

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[14] *Codex Iuris Canonici* (Rome, 1917), as quoted in Milner - p. 251
[15] Deuteronomy: Chapter XXIII, verse 1

masculinity through disease, or who had suffered "ill-fated accidents", such as a fall from a horse, an unfortunate bite from a farm animal or a nasty kick from another boy, could be admitted to the church choirs as castrati.[16] Of course, it is most unlikely that such a number of musically talented boys suffered the same fate. Accidental loss of masculinity does happen, but it must be rare. This statement is obviously a false justification for a brutal tradition the church was not yet willing to abandon.

In that context, the Church apparently disregarded any moral or social judgment. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, castration was a topic of much debate amongst theologians and philosophers. At the time, the inquest as to why the Church was not only tolerating, but also nourishing such barbaric deeds was a most crucial debate. St. Alphonsus Liguori (1697-1787)[17] gathered the views in the book *Moral Theology* under the caption "Whether it is lawful to castrate boys in order to preserve their voices".[18] The practice was on the whole condemned by all academics. German theologian, Paul Layman (1574-1635), wrote:

> "[…] they say, if it is not lawful for the good of the soul, how much less so for temporal gain; also, the preservation of the voice is not a good for such importance as to make it lawful to do what is unnatural."[19]

[16] P. Giles, *The Counter Teno*r, F. Muller Ltd.: London (1982) – p. 75 [Chapter 3: "Castrati"]
[17] St. Alphonsus Liguori: beatified in 1816; canonized in 1839; declared a *Doctor of the Church* in 1871
[18] *Theologia Moralis* (Rome1748; rev. and enlarged 2/1753-5); conclusive edition in Liguori: *Opera Morali*, ed. Gaude (Rome, 1905-12)
[19] Ibid.

Thomas Tamburini reacted to the German with a contrary opinion. He not only spoke in favor of the castrato's voice, but also defended the matter by claiming that castrating a boy not only gave him a golden musical instrument, but it also offered him a life of prosperity and wealth. His response sounded as follows:

> "[…] and that the conservation of the voice is certainly to be called a good of no little importance to them [the castrati], when through it they change their way of life for the better and through their whole life obtain fat and noble support."[20]

In a way, Tamburini was right. If the boy was indeed recruited from a poor family, his material life in the conservatorio and beyond was better than anything he could have hoped for in the parental home. Nevertheless, unless the boy became a famous, successful castrato, free to explore all aspects of the musical world, he paid a very high price for a life in service of the Church.

[20] Ibid.

I.2: Origins and Evolution

When did the production of castrated singers start? Who initiated the custom and why? Who carried out the operations? Where were the centers of castration? How many boys were subjected to the knife at any one time? How did this silently accepted practice become so widely spread, creating a true operatic mania in Italian opera for nearly two centuries?

These questions are all hard to answer. Before the 1550s, there are no documents pointing to the presence of castrati in Western Europe. They had, however, been present for many centuries in the Byzantine Church. In 1137, for example, a eunuch arrived in Smolensk from Constantinople. It is recorded that he sang there. It is not unlikely that the initial idea of castrato singers came from the Eastern cultures, via Venice, into Italy.

In 1556, the Duke of Ferrara wrote about a castrato to be sent to him from Savoy. Shortly thereafter, he hired two Spanish castrati for his court chapel. Newcomb suggests that his manner of writing indicates this might have been a fairly routine affair.[21] Just a few years later, Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga of Mantua sent out a party to look for new singers, in particular castrati.[22] In Rome, the first mention of castrati appears in the *Due dialoghi della musica* by Luigi Dentini

[21] A. Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara 1579-1597* (Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 30-1

[22] Discussed in ample detail by I. Fenlon, *Music and Patronage in Sixteenth-Century Mantua* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), Vol. I, p.110

(Rome, 1553).[23] Several writers mention castrati at the Papal Chapel between the years 1562-98. The first castrato, a Spaniard entered the choir in 1562, but there is no conclusive evidence of their employment until 1599.[24] An entry in the Sistine Diary of April that year notes that two priests joined the chapel choir, both of whom are described as *eunuchus.* As revealed before, the 1589 bull *Cum pro nostro pastorali munere,* released by Sixtus V,[25] authorized the hiring of castrato singers for the papal chapel. Furthermore, it is certain that six castrati sung under the direction of Orlandus Lassus (1532-1594) in the ducal chapel in Munich from, at the latest, 1574 onwards.[26]

From the seventeenth century onwards, castrati were not only present in Italy, but gained employment in all the major European courts: in Württemberg from 1610, in Vienna from 1637 and from about the mid-century, in Dresden. As far as is known, these singers were sent there from Italy. Castration seemed already to be predominantly associated with that country. They performed not only in the chapels, but also in the (private) concerts of the nobility, claiming their stake in all aspects of vocal music. Even at the birth of opera, they were right at hand. In Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, premiered at Mantua in 1607, the prologue (*La Musica*) and both female parts (*Euridice* and *Prosperina*) were sung by castrati. The male lead, however, was sung by a tenor. It would still take several decades before the castrato stood out in the cast as *primo uomo* and before he conquered the stage in both female and male roles.

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[23] According to Milner - p. 250

[24] It is worth noting here that there is no significant proof that Spain was a center for castration, although the first castrati in Italy seem to have been imported mainly from there.

[25] Refer to quote on p. 8, footnote 4

[26] According to Milner - p. 250

By the 1640s, the castrati were a daily part of musical life. Following Venice's initiative of 1637, public opera houses were being built all over Italy. As the reinforcement of the papal ban on women appearing in public performances became more extreme, the demand for castrati to sing women's roles at the opera escalated accordingly. The mass castration of young boys for the Italian conservatorios became a customary part of musical life and was silently encouraged by the public mania to hear these vocal virtuosi in the opera. When or where this craze originated is hard to determine. However, it is a certain factor that the demand for castrati was largely predisposed by the operatic needs in the second half of the seventeenth century and throughout the following century.

I.3: Recruitment of the Voices

The search for young boys with beautiful voices went on everywhere in Italy. Scouts would travel around the countryside, especially in the poor stricken South. They sought out talented boys and convinced the parents to release them to be taken to the conservatorio. Most often, these boys would be recruited from poor families, who were almost happy to give one of their boys to the Church, hoping that a successful career might ensure some fortune for the future. The case of the castrato Gaetano Majorano (1710-1783), better known as Cafarelli, is quite typical.[27] The singer was born into a peasant family in Bitonto, near Bari. His father saw his passion for music as a hindrance, since all farmers' children were expected to follow in the parental footsteps. A local musician, called Caffaro, discovered the boy and immediately recognized the vocal potential. He managed to convince the parents to let their son be operated on and to leave him in his care for further musical education. Caffaro trained the boy in the basics of music theory and singing and then took him to Naples to study with the grandest of Italian *maestri* at the time, Nicola Porpora (1686-1768). Cafarelli became a very successful singer and he traveled all over Europe. Allegedly, he nurtured great appreciation for his first *maestro*, from whom he adopted his stage name. Yet as was often the case with castrati, he remained bitter towards his parents for allowing him to be castrated. In some

[27] A. Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera,* Da Capo Press: New York (1974) - pp.141-54

places, a contractual market was developed to ensure that the parents would receive a certain percentage of the profits of their child's future success. The Teatro Valle in Rome has documents to show such transactions. They illustrate the greed of the parents, whose only concern was to exploit their offspring's talent.[28] Nevertheless, it also has to be said that in many of the cases, the parents saw a life-time opportunity for their child and a much more appealing future than the one he was intended for at birth.

After the parental veto was lifted, the recruiter would take the boy to a "cutter". A general misunderstanding occurs in relation to the famous operating "regions". Naples had the reputation of being the dominant base for castrations, but there is no tangible evidence of this. The confusion occurred most likely because Naples boasted the most famous conservatorios, thus making the city a rightful capital for castrato singing. However, the actual operations were probably performed almost everywhere in Italy. Though the "product" was celebrated and glorified, the practice of castration in itself remained taboo. The procedure happened under semi-clandestine circumstances, yet little advertising was necessary. An intricate network of recruiters, cutters and tutors made sure that the business was kept running and that no outside interference jeopardized the enterprise. However, no one would admit to castrations happening "at their own back door". Dr. Charles Burney witnessed this during his travels in Italy, and entered the following passage in his journal:

[28] Rosselli, "The Castrati as a Professional Group" - p. 152

> "I inquired throughout Italy at what place boys were chiefly qualified for singing by castration, but I could get no certain intelligence. I was told at Milan it was at Venice; at Venice, that it was Bologna, but at Bologna, the fact was denied, and I was referred to Florence; from Florence to Rome and from Rome I was sent to Naples. The operation is most certainly against the law in these places, as well as against nature; and all the Italians are so much ashamed of it, that in every province they transfer it to some other"[29]

Consequently, it seem unlikely that there is any truth in the rumors describing butchers or barbers setting up signs in their shop-windows, saying "boys fixed here" or "cheap castration done here".[30] It is more likely that the matter remained something one knew about, but did not mention. The city that comes closest to having an actual reputation of such kind is Norcia, a town in Umbria. The place gained fame during the sixteenth century as a center for animal castration.[31] It is known for sure that boys were castrated there, since Cafarelli was one of them. But whether the doctors at Norcia were better than the ones elsewhere, or if the rate of operating was higher than in other places remains an obscure theme. Bologna had the reputation of being a great center for "exporting" castrated boys, so it is safe to assume that such operations were carried out there. The Florentine hospital of Santa Maria Nuova also mentions castrations being executed there around the year 1715, by a doctor called Antonio Santarelli. The records show that his fee for the operation and recovery stay cost 24 scudi, or 18 if it was his assistant performing the surgery. In those days, that was quite a lot of money. The document points out that there was a room with eight beds especially reserved for boys who had recently endured the procedure.[32]

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[29] Ch. Burney, *Dr. Burney's Musical Tours in Europe* (London, 1773), vol. I - p. 247
[30] Barbier - p. 5
[31] The term "norcino" in Italian literally means "castrator of animals" [According to Barbier - p. 28]
[32] Facts and numbers according to Barbier - p. 29

Although the production of castrati started in order to employ them in the church choirs, the opera proved to be a much more lucrative field for the singers. The ambition of the singers was therefore increasingly focused on the stage and the vocal training encompassed more and more operatic repertoire. It was the professional goal of every castrato to sing in the theatre, but only a small percentage of the trainee singers grew out to be truly successful. The rest sang in small, second-rate theaters or in church choirs of different standings. Naturally, the saddest stories are the ones relating the young castrati who completely lost their voice. There was no guarantee that when an operation was carried out the "adult voice" would maintain the same vocal quality it had in childhood. Some singers turned out mediocre, some even lost their voice entirely. Needless to say that the lives of the latter were practically completely ruined. When the operation did not prove to be a success the composer Giovanni Paisiello (1741-1816) supposedly said that these boys had been "castrated in bad weather".[33] Thankfully, the conservatorio provided instrumental lessons for all the boys, so their musical training was not completely wasted in case of fatal voice loss.

[33] Barbier - p. 29

I.4: The conservatorios

Once the boys had recovered from the operation they usually went into a conservatorio to start a lengthy education in general subjects and music. There were certain requirements to meet on order to be considered for admission in such an institution. The age limit was set at seven years old. Naturally, they had to be baptized and preferably from "a good family", meaning that the boy's parents were married. The child had to be free from diseases and remain at the school for a contracted period of time, which was different from school to school. It was quite usual for boys to be submitted to the operation even before they were accepted at a school. The archives of the Naples Conservatorio incorporate handwritten requests from little boys pleading for admission. The requests are moving to read. Many of the letters remark the misery of the boy's present life; emphasizing the penury of his family, a parent's death, many sisters and brothers, general poverty and other arduous circumstances. The board would select certain applications and send representatives to establish whether the boy was fit for the school or not. Often, the number of students was limited, making the competition fierce for the boys. In 1730, for example, the Neapolitan school, Santa Maria di Loreto, raised its age requirement to limit the applications, and fixed the number of students at twelve.[34]

[34] Ibid. – p. 33

As mentioned before, the most famous conservatorios were in Naples. The oldest document dates from 1537 and affects the foundation of the Conservatorio Santa Maria di Loreto. Three more institutions followed: the Pietà dei Turchini in 1584, the Poveri dei Gesù Cristo in 1589 and finally, the Sant'Onofrio in Capuana in 1600. Originally, they had little or nothing to do with musical training. All four of these foundations were first and foremost set up to take care of orphans and children of poor families and to provide them with an education. The second half of the sixteenth century had been disastrous for the Italian population: the strain of the Spanish rulers, extortionate taxes, several bad harvests, plague epidemics and wars caused tremendous destitution. The Church saw the setting up of charitable organizations not only as an act of Christianity but also as a means of religious propaganda and a way to extend their power. At first, they were erected on private initiative, but fairly soon, the Poveri di Gesù Cristo was passed under ecclesiastic authority. The three other schools were subjected to the secular supervision of the Spanish viceroys, the Austrian viceroys and finally, the King of Naples. They all had the same aim: to receive abandoned, poor and orphaned children and to provide them with food, shelter and the guarantee of a prominent education in literature and religion. The teachers, still few in number at this point, were all churchmen.

The early decades of the seventeenth century proved to be a turning point. Italy knew a revitalization of cultural and social life and a new kind of music thrived all over the big cities and in the courts. The need for competent composers, accomplished musicians and trained singers for church music became vital. Naples was unrivaled in its reverence for music and developed its own characteristics and style. Soon, the orphanages set themselves up as

music schools, expecting no less than excellence from their students. Their new objective was to preserve, transmit and refine the musical traditions.[35] The numbers of students increased so rapidly that lay members were invited to join the teaching staff. The required funding came from the Church, the State and from private donors. For well over a hundred years, Naples was the most distinguished center of music education in Italy. However, an untoward decline in the middle of the eighteenth century led to the downfall of the city's musical educational and reputation.

Today, the Neapolitan Conservatorio di San Pietro at Majella contains the entire compilation of the *Libri Maggiori* from the city's individual conservatorios, except those of the Poveri di Gesù Cristo, which are at the bishop's residence. These documents include a massive amount of information on all incoming and outgoing students (*introiti* and *esiti*).

All four schools were exposed to the same rigid administrative hierarchy. The Santa Maria di Loreto is a case point. At the head of the school stood a president, who was assisted by six governors, all laymen, responsible for different sectors of the institute. This body of chief executives supervised a basically ecclesiastic board of directors who resided permanently within the conservatorio. At their head was a rector, below him a vice-rector, then a house manager (*maestro di casa*), several prefects, one steward responsible for meals, a few chaplains and a sacristan, all supported by a number of servants. Besides these, there was also a large group of teachers (*maestri*), who could be laymen or clerics. The latter were not obliged to live on the premises. The academic

[35] Hence the term *conservare*, which means to conserve, formed the root of the word "conservatorio".

maestri taught in humanities subjects such as grammar, rhetoric, religion and philosophy and later also geometry and science. The *maestro di capella,* sometimes assisted by a vice-chapel master, instructed the students in composition, harmony and singing. It was each school's target to attract the most reputable teachers to bring fame and prestige to the school. The Santa Maria di Loreto, for example, was very pleased to appoint Francesco Provenzale in 1663, the memorable Nicolo Porpora in 1739, and Francesco Durante in 1742.

The conservatorio life endured by the young boys was certainly not an easy one. They were subjected to a severe daily schedule, which regulated every action and determined every minute of the day. A book called *Rules and Statutes* has survived in the archives of the Conservatorio della Pietà dei Turchini and it relates the ritual students had to go through after admission. Barbier gives the following interpretation of the initiation ceremony:

> "After confessing and receiving communion he had to kneel before the altar where the rector was standing, while carrying over his arm the cassock and surplice, which he would wear later. A short prayer and the blessing of his clothes preceded a fervent *Veni Creator Spiritus* intoned, standing, by al other *figlioli*; two assistants then helped him to dress before the recital by everyone present of the prayer to the Virgin and the psalm of David *Ecce quam bonum*[36]; the rector's blessing concluded this solemn ceremony." [37]

Although the conservatorio trainees were free to go their own way upon graduation, it was not rare for them to take on an ecclesiastical career. From a very young age, they were steeped in religious life. Every aspect of their education answered to the glory of God. Becoming a priest was therefore a predictable choice. Moreover, remaining in the sanctity of the Church might have

[36] Psalms of David: "How good and pleasant it is for the brethren to dwell together in unity",
[37] Barbier - p. 41

helped the castrati to protect them from some of the prejudice and mockery they might face in worldly society.

In their daily schedule, the boys would get up at 6.30am during wintertime, and at 4.45am during the summer months. The boys had to literally jump out of bed and instantly chant *Laudate Pueri Domine* with all the other boys in their dormitory, alternating with the boys from the adjacent quarters. While singing, the boys would have to get dressed and make their beds, as well as wash their hands and face. At the sound of the bell, everyone gathered in the chapel for a half-hour of prayer, followed by a mass. Other prayer sessions, collective or individual, would follow throughout the day until the "evening examination of the conscience". After that, the boys were allowed to go to bed at about 10pm in winter and no later than 11.30 pm in summer. This was the extent of the boys' religious formation. In addition, there was also a very rigid agenda of academic and musical lessons to be followed during the day.[38]

The boys were expected to exercise a firm discipline beyond their studies. The everyday behavior of the boys was very strictly monitored. During meals, which occurred at noon and 9.30pm or 10.30pm according to the time of year, complete silence had to be observed. Each meal was followed by thirty minutes of recreation during which the boys were only allowed to mingle with boys from their own dormitory and not with those older or younger than themselves. A siesta was allowed in summer and during the night, utter decency and silence was expected. The minimum night clothing was a chemise and drawers, even in the hottest months and it was unthinkable that a boy would get up naked in the middle of the night, not only because this was considered improper, but also

[38] Barbier – pp. 39-46

because it would cause great discontent in the eyes of God. The conservatorios had their own dress code, with a uniform in distinct colors, which allowed the Neapolitans to tell the children of each school apart. The uniforms were simple in design and could sport no ornamental lace, bows or ribbons. The boys could not have long hair and their appearance had to be distinguished and serene at all times.

In the conservatorios, there were two distinct groups of children. On the one hand, there were the poor orphan children. Although the institution was built for the benefit of the social cases, admission was not automatic. Besides being Neapolitan, they also had to demonstrate a certain musical ability. Children in this situation were entirely supported by the charity of the institution and paid nothing towards their stay and tuition. In return, they signed a contract for four six, eight, ten or sometimes even twelve years, binding them physically as well as ethically to the conservatorio. The second group integrated the paying scholars. These boys could be neither poor nor orphaned and they did not have to be Neapolitan. They were known as the *convittori* or *educandi*. The tuition and boarding fee for these boys was high, but they could count on a privileged treatment from the institute, such as more or better food and the freedom to leave the premises whenever they wished. Due to the divided backgrounds of these two groups, it is likely that they did little socializing with each other.

Within this corpus of students, the most special unit was undoubtedly the castrati, who were also called the *puttini castrati* (castrated children) or *figlioli angiolini* (angel children). In some respects, they were subjected to more severe rules within the school's structure, but to compensate, they enjoyed better treatment. The castrati lived under special care. Being considered a precious

"commodity" in each school, they were protected as much as possible from all outside perils. They were, for example, not allowed to leave the schoolgrounds for the night, or to take meals outside the school (even not when accompanied by their parents!). Yet, on the other hand, the necessity to protect and preserve their voices gave them the right to sleep in the warmest rooms of the building and they were fed better and more than the other children. Burney observes the following after a visit to the Conservatorio di Sant'Onofrio:

> "There are in the college sixteen young *castrati*, and these live up stairs, by themselves, in warmer apartments than the other boys, for fear of colds, which might not only render their delicate voices unfit for exercise at present, but hazard the entire loss of them for ever."[39]

In general, the castrati were given all kinds of privileges within the institution. An document dated from 1699, from the Santa Maria di Loreto archive, states that the voices of the eunuchs seemed to be lacking in strength due to the dampness of their quarters. In response, the boys were given thick woolen underskirts to wear during wintertime. At Sant'Onofrio, it was no secret that the castrati were given better nourishment than the other boys, such as eggs, broth and chicken. In the archives of the Poveri di Gesù Cristo, a steward made a note of a special order he placed for the castrati, including rolls of *provolone* cheese, which were not on the standard menu.[40]

The journals of the spectators who witnessed the dismal living situation in the conservatorios during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, all state that the boys looked generally unhealthy, badly dressed and malnourished. Sarah Goudar remarks the following:

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[39] Burney, *Dr. Burney's Musical Tours in Europe,* vol. I - p. 271
[40] As stated by Barbier - p. 45

> "As a rule, these boys have thin faces, as pale as death. Only the administrators have full faces and florid complexion. Most of the latter are on the verge of death from overeating while their students lack nourishment."[41]

It is safe to assume from these remarks that the boys suffered while the officials were filling their bellies and pockets. These dire circumstances inevitably caused tension between the students and the direction. Fierce rebellion answered the cruel deceit of some of the supervisors. At times, the uprising of the students disturbed the disciplined life at the conservatorio. In 1705, the *Diario Napolitano* illustrated a true revolt at the Conservatorio della Pietà. In the night of September 17, at about 2 o'clock in the morning, the *figlioli* broke out in mutiny. Goaded by hunger and rage, they threw the rector and the vice-rector on the street, still dressed in their nightshirts. The Castel Nuovo, a near-by military fortress, was notified, a drawbridge was lowered and a cannon was drawn up to the institute. In the early morning, the cannon fired loose cartridges to terrify the boys. They had to give up their siege and surrender to the authorities. Some of them were sent to prison and others were banned from the kingdom, while the supervisors, who were living it up on money intended for the boys, remained scot-free[42]. In relation to this account and various similar ones, Barbier makes a good point. He considers that by this time, the integrity of the "charitable" orphanages had already suffered great damage. The corruption of the system helped to set in motion the downfall of the conservatorios in the second half of the seventeenth century.[43] It is impossible to think that these practices could go

[41] S. Goudar, *Remarques sur la Musique et la Dance* (Venice: Palese, 1773) - p. 20
[42] Barbier - pp. 45-6
[43] Ibid. - p. 46

on for much longer and that society would keep turning a blind eye to what went on inside the walls of the conservatorio.

There were not only disagreements between the directing bodies and the students. The youngsters were in constant conflict amongst themselves as well. Called by the dreadful names of the *integri* and the *non-integri,* or the "complete" and the "incomplete" ones, there was always a tension between these two groups. Obviously, the castrati were easy targets for harassment by the adolescent boys. On top of that came the fact that they generally enjoyed special treatment. As far as one can see, it was both jealousy and ignorance driving a wedge between the two groups making their already harsh life hardly easier.

Instances of disobedience and irregularity seemed to have happened on a repeated basis, judging from the number of warnings and punishments that were handed out. Stealing, showing contempt towards superiors, causing scandals to damage the school's reputation and mishandling of weapons were considered severe offenses and automatically caused the student in question to be expelled. The *integri* seemed to get into trouble much more often than the castrati, but usually, the time spent in the conservatorio was not a happy one for any of the boys. Besides the rigid discipline and the dismal treatment, the children often retained unhappy memories of the difficult life inside the institute.[44] Orphans, for example, who were forced to study music even if they lacked enthusiasm or talent, saw the daily practice as a burden more than an opportunity. In the course of almost two hundred years, many students ran away. In the archives of Sant'Onofrio, some entries read "Francesco Paolo Agresto. Eunuch. Admitted 27

[44] Ibid. – p. 57

April 1726. Ran away, being a rogue and badly behaved"; "Pietro Apa. Admitted 11 November 1754 to serve this place for twelve years. Ran away in July 1764. Left his bed, two tables, two chairs and two mattresses"; "Francesco Juppariello. Admitted 28 March 1760. Ran away in April 1768 when he had one month to go before the end of his contract. But he was a student who behaved well."[45]

Though Naples boasted the most legendary of conservatorios, they never held a monopoly on musical training in Italy. In most large cities, conservatorios were raised to launch organized musical education. Rome and Bologna both had schools with very high reputations, and so did Milan and Florence. Not all these schools were destined solely for castrati, but they also included tenors and basses in their training.

In Rome, the Pontifical Chapel was naturally interested in training castrati locally. The city endeavored to hold down a vital reputation as a center for religious music, so there was an obvious interest in keeping a steady stream of musicians and singers to perform music in the churches. Since the Papal States had enforced a complete ban on female performers the necessity for castrati was even more urgent than elsewhere in Italy. In 1694, a census of Roman church singers showed that there were 87 male sopranos and altos, alongside 66 tenors and basses, and 18 *maestri di cappella*, some of whom might also have been castrati.[46] In all probability, there were also a few free-lance castrati. Adding all these up, there were around one hundred castrati living in Rome at the end of the seventeenth century. Whether all these were actually trained in the Roman

[45] Di Giacomo, S., *Il conservatorio di Sant'Onofrio a Capuana e quello di santa Maria di Loreto* (Naples, 1928) - as quoted by Barbier - p. 57

[46] Rosselli, "The Castrati as a Professional Group" - p.156 [He quotes a study by Mischiati of the 24 most important Roman chapels of the time.]

schools is hard to determine, but it does give an idea as to how crucial the presence of good high voices was in Rome. Many conservatorios established themselves to accommodate the musical needs of the city. The school founded by Virgilio Mazzocchi (1592-1665), for example, was one of the most famous springboards for a castrato's career in Rome.

The other chief center for church music within the Papal States was Bologna. The chapel of San Petronio was certainly amongst the most notable ones. Pier Francesco Tosi (ca 1653-1732) and Francesco Antonio Pistocchi (1659-1726), two celebrated castrati who turned to teaching after they enjoyed an extensive stage career, established a magnificent conservatorio in the city. As the objective of these conservatorios became increasingly focused on musical instruction, famous performers launched independent schools all over Italy. The idea of a charitable institution lost much of its original significance and the schools became educational foundations with the sole aim of training young boys for the musical profession. Other important conservatorios were the schools of Francesco Peli in Modena, Giovanni Paita in Genoa, Francesco Brivio in Milan and Francesco Redi in Florence.[47]

[47] For more information on the Italian schools outside Naples, see Barbier – pp. 57-61

I.5: Training and Education of the Castrati

It took but half a century from the time of the initial establishment of the first Neapolitan conservatorio to the blooming of musical education at similar institutes all over Italy. Besides a rigorous academic training, the boys also had a heavy daily agenda of musical lessons and other duties. Every lesson period lasted two hours and the program encompassed literature, voice lessons, counterpoint and instrumental instruction. At Naples, voice classes were divided into four different groups: two for the castrati (*soprani* and *alti*), one for the tenors and one for the basses. In the middle of the eighteenth century, a system of "shared teaching" was devised. The oldest students, called *mastricelli*, would teach the youngest ones, especially in subjects like counterpoint and music theory. It was an excellent idea since the young students were far too often left alone to study. In addition, some three or four times a week, the students would be taught *par excellence*, which referred to the main professors.

Although the musicianship and instruction was of the most esteemed level, the circumstances in which the students were taught and had to practice was, without doubt, abominable. The Count of Espinchal traveled to Naples and marked the following observations:

> "I had expected to find these establishments better organized and maintained in a country where the art of music appears to have reached the greatest state of perfection. I have however seen there young people singing with great taste, but at the cost of part of their life."[48]

After his visit to Sant'Onofrio, Burney was equally astounded at the cramped and crowded conditions the boys were living in. He witnessed the shared practice area and noticed that out of thirty or forty players, only two were practicing the same piece. He noted:

> "In the common practising room there was a *Dutch Concert*, consisting of seven or eight harpsichords, more than as many violins and several voices, all performing different things, and in different keys: other boys were writing in the same room; but it being holiday, many were absent who usually study and practice there."[49]

Burney states that this system may give the student the skill to play more independently, but he continues to criticize that it probably prevented the boys from developing and perfecting an individual quality of sound. Espinchal saw the circumstances as an ideal way of learning to perform autonomously and refining the ear:

> "I was greatly astonished by seeing many students in a long gallery, each one carrying out a totally different lesson with his voice or instrument, and I was assured that this perfects the ear."[50]

Lack of space was a constant problem for the conservatorios. It wasn't until 1746 that the *Rules and Statutes* of the Pietà dei Turchini considered a more organized system for the practice sessions:

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[48] Le Comte d'Espinchal, *Journal d'émigration*, (Perrin, Paris: 1912) - p.106 [It is debatable whether the Count means that "at the cost of part of their lives" refers to the bad treatment they received or to the fact that they gave up their masculinity to be able to sing this well.]
[49] Burney, *Dr. Burney's Musical Tours in Europe*, vol. I – p. 269
[50] Comte d'Espinchal, *Journal d'émigration* - p. 106

> "The eunuch class will perform their singing exercises all together in their own dormitory, the tenors in the hall, the basses in the upper cloakroom; the violins in the lower corner of the senior dormitory; the oboes in the reception hall; the cellos and the double basses in the small passage to the upper cloakroom and the trombones and trumpets in the lower cloakroom."[51]

The students at the conservatorios often enjoyed the opportunity to perform at private parties and functions of the local courts. Besides having the opportunity to present their talents at religious services, funerals, processions and official church events, this was another occasion to gain experience as a public performer. The schools in turn gained fame and reputation by sending their best pupils to the most influential palaces. The castrati were particularly eager to obtain the positions in the choirs of the local theatres. In Naples, for example, the Teatro di San Carlo employed singers from the conservatorio from 1737 onward. Working in the theatre meant that the young students had to leave the conservatorio premises for the evening and return on their own accord. Many of the schools had moral objections since the late night performances disrupted the disciplinary routine and could cause irreparable harm to the student in question. The governors of the Pietà dei Turchini issued a lengthy petition to the King in 1759, in which they explained the "moral dangers" in detail. Students had to make up for lost sleep by getting up late, missing crucial activities, such as morning prayers, mass and grammar lessons. Other objections were thrown at the friendships that grew between the students and "those women who sing and dance there", causing grave moral laxity amongst the young musicians.[52] Moreover, their late night return trips to the institutions were often interrupted by visits in taverns, where the youngsters played cards or draughts. The

[51] As quoted by Barbier - p. 49

[52] This argument obviously applies to situations outside the Papal States, where women were allowed to play in the theatre.

conservatorio doors could not close until the last students were inside, so the situation was easily taken advantage of. With such a vivid nightlife, the castrati were suffering vocally. At times, the situation was so bad that the schools were forced to engage outside singers to substitute for the exhausted youngsters in the choir. The Pietà used all these arguments to persuade the King to put a restriction on the recruitment of conservatorio singers for the theatre. This request was granted and the young castrati were no longer allowed to appear in the opera productions. It is questionable whether the governor's concerns were purely aimed at the students' welfare, or if they were directed to protect the school's reputation and intent to reserve them for a religious life. Certainly, part of it was a means of sheltering the castrati from the outside. It was always desirable for a castrato to become a priest, whether he actually had a religious vocation or not. That is, the Church ensured not only the musical quality of their services, but also provided a steady supply of well-educated priests. This concept would be severely jeopardized if the young boys became too interested in the aspects of "normal" life. To ensure the continuation of their ission, it was safer to prevent the boys from having too much knowledge of the world beyond the church and the conservatorio.

During their education, the highpoints of the day were the sessions with the singing teachers and the *maestri di cappella*. For up to ten years or more, every young castrato would practice a heavy program of vocal exercises. Breathing was the basis of all singing technique and a good breath control would enable a singer to overcome all problems. The young singers worked on muscular development, monitoring inhalation and exhalation and distributing the breath correctly over musical phrases. An infallible technique, vocal flexibility, a

feel for appropriate ornamentation and an incessant vocal control were the aims of the tutors. *Passaggi*, *messa di voce*, *agilità* and endless lists of embellishments and expressive tools were instructed on the course to perfection.

In 1594, Giovanni Battista Bovicelli collected a book of diminutions for singers, called *Regole, Passaggi di Musica.*[53] At the time, Bovicelli was canon at the *duomo* of Milan and his writings were aimed at the singers of the cathedral choir. They are mostly ornamented versions of religious pieces and mass movements. His divisions are written in the soprano clef, underneath the original line of music, also in the soprano clef, to be able to compare the two at the same time. The level of difficulty indicates that he is writing for accomplished singers. In his foreword, he suggests these movements as standard examples of ornamented upper parts to be sung at church. Besides actually composing newly decorated pieces, he also explains when and where ornaments should by applied and how they should be executed, as well as providing an endless list of different cadenzas. Most passages are deomstrated with both a bad example (*essempio cattivo*), followed by one or more good ones (*essempio buoni*). This document shows the style and approach of church singing in those days and it also attests of how skillful the singers had to be, both in their musical and vocal capacity. In the example *Angelus ad Pastores,* on a melody by Cipriano de Rore, the elaborations on *magnum* and *alleluia* call to mind that the customs of the *seconda prattica,* in respect to ornamentation and expressive sentiment were steadily observed.

[53] Bovicelli, G. B., *Regole, Passaggi di Musica*, (Venice, 1594) – ed. by N. Bridgman for Bärenreiter (1957)

This tradition of musical expression and decoration in the upper parts can be considered as the groundwork in the art of castrato singing. The virtuosity and affected style of singing were developed under influence of the Italian composers of the *seconda prattica*, a movement, which flourished under Claudio Monteverdi. However, the Council of Trent specifically advised against the use of too much ornamentation:

> "[…] all should be pronounced clearly and distinctly, and make its way undisturbed to the way of the listeners […] it should have nothing profane intermingled with it."[54]

Several popes in the 17th century, particularly Alexander VII, spoke out against the florid style in church music. They considered this manner of singing "artificial" and advocated that it belonged only in secular music. However, in the conservatorios the castrati trained to sing in this fashion. Their intensive practicing enabled them to excel in it, so it became part of their trademark. Since none of the popes made an effort to get rid of the castrati, the style survived in church music anyway and the papal objection remained largely ineffective.

According to almost every source, it was the astounding vocal technique and virtuosity, which made castrato singing so impressive and popular in its day. The roots of this vocal trend lie in the performance practice of the end of the sixteenth century. The style of the castrati eventually became an example to all musical genres. It established itself most prominently in opera. The so-called virtuoso style is generally considered the birth of Italian *bel canto* singing. In 1723, Pier Francesco Tosi published his book *Opinione de' Cantori Antichi e Moderni*. John Ernest Galliard translated the treatise into English in the 1730s

[54] As quoted by Milner - p. 251

under the title *Observations on the Florid Song.*[55] It is one of the most comprehensive and authoritative guides to baroque singing, comparable to Quantz's *On Playing the Flute*, or C.P.E. Bach's guidelines to keyboard instrumentalists. Tosi regards all aspects of vocal performance. Four chapters are dedicated to interpretation: the *appoggiatura*, the shake (various types of trills), divisions (voice agility) and recitatives. He then contributes a part called *Observations for a student*, in which he advises every voice teacher to make sure their students had the intellectual ability to become a professional musician. Additionally, there is guideline for the teacher on how to correct various mistakes frequently encountered in the classroom. The next two chapters are on the interpretation of arias and cadenzas and he finished with two sections on "good taste". The first pertains to the appearance of a singer on the stage; the second is concerned with the correct interpretation of a score. It is evident that Tosi was writing about castrati. Being a castrato himself, he opened the treatise with a discourse on how to teach the high voice (*Observations for One who Teaches a Soprano*). He gained his pedagogical experience at a conservatorio in Bologna, where he was obviously teaching young castrati. The guide shows how in-depth the training of the young singer was and what was expected from these young voices before they were turned over to the professional world. He concludes the book with the following advice:

[55] P. F. Tosi, *Observations on the Florid Song*, transl. by Mr. Galliard (Stainer and Bell, London: 1987) – ed. by M. Pilkington

> "Remember what has been wisely observed, that mediocrity of merit can but for a short time eclipse the true sublime which, how old so ever it grows, can never die.
>
> […]
>
> Learn from the errors of others. O great lesson! It costs little, and instructs much. Of everyone something is to be learned, and the most ignorant is sometimes the greatest master." [56]

In general, Tosi's book founds the basis of the *bel canto* technique.[57] In the nineteenth century, it temporarily remained a highly regarded guidebook, but lost attention with time. Tosi became to some extent a forgotten figure in the history of vocal education, living in the shadow of the Italian romantic school, represented by people such as Garcia and Marchesi. The disappearance of the popular castrati certainly played a part in that, as Tosi's teachings were aimed at this voice-type in particular. However, his treatise was the first to document the basics of the Italian *bel canto* technique. He emphasized with diligence on the importance of mixing the resonance cavities, an essential part of healthy, "full-voice" singing. His fundamental goal was that the chest resonance might be heard in the top register and the head voice in the low register. He encouraged the singer to particularly practice the transitional areas between the registers so that the passage would sound effortless, smooth and seemingly without change of vocal timbre or intensity. The singers who were true masters of their voice succeeded in uniting the upper and lower register, therefore blending the voice over the entire tessitura. Another very important vocal issue concerns the breath. Tosi advises to support the voice with the natural strength of the chest but without tightening the throat. In this case, the chest is synonym for the breath. The vocalist should maintain a high sternum, elevating and "opening" the

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[56] Ibid. - pp. 87-88

[57] R. Celetti, *A History of Bel Canto*, Clarendon Press: Oxford (1991) – pp. 14-107 [Chapter 2: "The Vocal Art in Baroque Opera"]

chest so as to allow a maximum use of the lung capacity. Consequently, the singer should articulate the voice supported by the breath, not starting from the throat. This sound advice is still taught today in the "old-fashioned" *bel canto* style (commonly known as the "Italian School"). It permits the singer to use the voice in full resonance and generally produces a bigger, more sustained and acute sound than the twentieth-century instruction on the so-called abdominal breathing would. To this day, it is the technique still employed by almost all the *bel canto* and *verismo* singers.[58]

The young castrati were emphatically restricted to an intense schedule of musical study. So related the young Cafarelli on his daily routine:

> "In the morning:
> 1 hour of singing passages of difficult execution
> 1 hour study of letters[59]
> 1 hour singing exercises *in front of a mirror*, to practice deportment and gesture, and to guard against ugly grimaces while singing, etc.
> In the afternoon:
> 1/2 hour of theoretical work
> 1/2 counterpoint on a *canto fermo*
> 1 hour of studying counterpoint with the *cartella*[60]
> 1 hour studying letters"[61]

The rest of the day encompassed harpsichord practice and motet writing as well as psalm or other compositional exercises. The schedule clearly makes room for vocal practice as well as intellectual study. The voice was not overburdened and the technical aspects of performance, such as understanding poetry and stage presentation were as important as vocal technique.

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[58] For a detailed interpretation of Tosi's technique, see Celletti - pp. 110-15
[59] Studying *letters* means linguistic study of the words and their function in song.
[60] A *cartella* was a glazed tile with music-staves on which an exercise would be written. The work would then be erased and the *cartella* used again.
[61] Schedule taken from Heriot - p. 48

It is not surprising that with these intensive schedules, the adolescent castrati were ready for the stage by age of seventeen or eighteen. Some singers dedicated ten or twelve years of their life to the disciplined study and were almost infallible by the time they were ready for the stage. The major advantage of training the castrato voice was the fact that they came into the school at a very young age. Hence, they could enjoy an uninterrupted vocal education until they were adults, without puberty interfering with the physical growth of their voice. An important question has to be raised, however, when addressing the technical abilities of these singers. It remains vague whether “virtuoso singing“ was actually a result of the demands composers placed upon their performers, or whether the advancing vocal technique demonstrated in performance practice led to a more florid style of composing. The second half of the sixteenth century experienced the rise of new thoughts and ideas in music, freshly inspired concepts on interpretation and a novel look on musical genres. This resulted in more emotional impact, more dramatic expression and eventually, it led to the birth of dramatic music and opera. It is perhaps no coincidence that the first castrati singers in Italian music start appearing in that period. Bovicelli’s book of divisions (1594) suggests that florid song was an everyday practice in church music performance. If, in addition, the standpoint is taken that vocal improvisation was part of musical training, it is only a small step to put those two ideas together. The new compositional style might well have been a result of a going tradition in singing and not a fashionable invention on the composer’s account. In other words, the composers might have written down a solid version of what could have been a singer’s ornamented interpretation. Either way, the castrati were singers who possessed the technical aptitude to execute these

difficult scores. Inevitably, in their own right, they therefore unwittingly promoted the practice of castration by cultivating their unsurpassed musical excellence.

I.6: Theatre in Baroque Italy

As mentioned before, the castrati were at first produced only to serve the music of the church. However, it was inevitable that their art should reach the theatres as well. It was not until 1769 that the ban on female performers in the Papal States was lifted. In the meantime, only male sopranos sang the high parts in the theatres of that region and the fashion was adopted elsewhere as well. The *primo uomo,* who was invariably a castrato, became more important than the *prima donna*. In consequence, the phenomenon of public theatres, which was responsible for making opera available to everyone, was largely in charge of the castrato's triumphant success. In due course, the production of castrati for church choirs was encouraged by the operatic needs of the time.

In 1637, Venice opened the first Italian public theatre, the Teatro San Cassiano. The example was soon copied. By the end of that century, all Italian states had at least one opera house. Some hundred-and-fifty towns in the country participated actively in the opera culture. The Papal States alone had no less than fifty theatres and Rome and Venice boasted eight. During the carnival season, there would be an additional five to eight performances per night in the latter cities. Naples and Florence each had three or four, followed by towns such as Milan, Turin, Padua, Parma or Vicenza, which only had one or two.[62]

[62] Barbier – pp. 62-5

The Teatro San Carlo in Naples became Europe's leading theatre when it was inaugurated in 1737. Both its size and magnificence made great impressions on visitors. Forty years before La Scala in Milan and fifty-five before La Fenice in Venice, the theatre became the most remarkable masterpiece of theatre architecture in Europe. One hundred and eighty boxes with ten or twelve seats each, a huge royal box, a gigantic salon with fifteen seats surmounted by a massive crown and a wide, deep stage designed for the most impressive décor settings and set changes. Every box was fitted with mirrors, each of which was surrounded by candleholders. During the performances, thousands of lit candles, their image multiplied by reflection in the mirrors, would flicker against the rosy-cream interior of the theatre. The sight must have been quite magical. Many other seventeenth century theatres in Italy equally amazed the visitors. The Teatro Regio in Milan (precedent of La Scala), the Pergola in Florence, the Alberti and the Argentina in Rome and the San Bartolomeo in Naples were all among the supreme theatres of the time. In the eighteenth century, the Teatro Comunale was erected in Bologna. Together with La Scala in Milan, the San Carlo in Naples and La Fenice in Venice, it formed the "four greats".

Most theatres were supported and subsidized by patrons from the nobility. Following Venice, which was the example throughout Italy, a local aristocratic family ordered a theatre to be built.[63] Once the building was ready to be used, they instated a board of managers to run the business and then raked up the profits from the public sales. This system had many advantages, as it

[63] The family sometimes even "personalized" their theatre. For example, King Charles III of Bourbon built the San Carlo in Naples and had it named after his patron Saint. Moreover, the King always had the season open on Saint Charles's day (November 4th).

encouraged private enterprise and freedom of initiative. The process could happen quickly and independently and little or no outside interference had to be endured. Yet there were also a few drawbacks. If the directing body of the theatre was incompetent, or the public lost interest, the theatre would suffer financially. Furthermore, the competition was high and there was a constant rivalry with other theatres to engage the most excellent musicians and put on the most lavish show. A single badly planned season could ruin a theatre's reputation and in due course, result in bankruptcy.

The key person in the theatre management was the impresario. His task was enormous: putting together a good program, recruiting the best singers for the leading parts, budgeting the productions and maintaining good relations with the aristocracy. Typically, the season lasted from Christmas to Shrove Tuesday.[64] The financial sources for that term were fairly limited. In those days, opera companies seldom had fixed troupes of singers. It was therefore a constant battle to engage the right singers to perform the principal and secondary parts. Hiring understudies would have been an unnecessary luxury, so the impresario lived in constant fear of his singers falling ill or becoming indisposed in some ways. It was not unusual to see a singer perform on stage, coughing and sneezing while suffering from a cold. In addition, the impresario was also at the mercy of the artists. Since the responsibility of the production fell mostly on his shoulders, the singers saw great opportunity to manipulate, torment and even threaten the impresario in order to indulge in their needs and desires. He was

[64] The two large exceptions to that rule were the San Carlo in Naples, which started the season on November 4th (as from 1737), and the theatres in Venice, which ran a season of about four months, starting at the end of October, and ending on Shrove Tuesday.

the person to sort out tiffs between the performers or endure their tantrums and tyrannizing fits when the composer or stage director wasn't accommodating their wishes, or when a costume wasn't elaborate or flattering enough to their taste. More than often, the impresario had to negotiate with extreme caution when a singer discovered that a rival performer was being paid more. The smallest mistake could lead to losing the principal star at the last minute, which could mean the ruin of the entire production.

Italian theatre was notorious for its luxurious spectacle. Special effects, impressive sets, decorative stage and costume designs, complex choreography, animals and elaborate crowd scenes were never subjected to financial skimping. In *Alessandro nel Indie*, Cafarelli shared the star role with an elephant. In Turin, one production saw a monkey playing tricks on stage and another had two live camels appearing next to the famous Farinelli. Horses were also not unusual on stage. In Florence, when the opera *Ipermnestra* was presented at La Pergola, there were no less than ninety-four mounted soldiers on the stage! Crowd scenes were spared no expense. Again in Florence, during a production of *Ercole in Tebe*, three hundred and fifty costumes were sewn. Apart for the eleven main characters, there were seventeen divinities, five choirs and a troupe of extras in the roles of pages, servants, guards and nymphs. Sarah Goudar was very impressed when she saw Piccini's *Alessandro* in Naples:

> "In this opera there is something better than songs and dances. The men fight as though in war. Troops take part in organized battles and you witness a siege carried out according to the rules. These are not wretched men picked up on street corners, as happens in Paris and London, but real soldiers trained in military skill. All the combatants are masters of arms. The scenery is superb and in keeping with the rest of the performance."[65]

Naturally, it was only in the greatest of theatres that spectacles of this magnitude were put on.

Costumes were a great source of decorative display on stage. At the Teatro Argentina in Rome, Caesar appeared on stage wearing court shoes with scarlet red heels, and buckles set with brilliants, silk stockings with embroidered flowers and breeches with emerald buttons. Nonetheless, the castrato probably terrorized the impresario into allocating this outfit and any objection would have been futile. In general, the castrati wore lavish costumes, tall wigs, adorned high-heeled shoes and many useful attributes with the purpose of impressing the audience. Their faces were made up with powders and colors, and their appearance corresponded to the most attractive latest fashion.

The set designers of those days were true architects. Famous designers of the time were Bernini in Rome, the Bibiena family in Bologna and the Galliari brothers in Turin. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Florentine designer Nicolò Sabbattini collected his knowledge into a treatise called *Pratica di fabricar scene e machine ne' teatri.*[66] The book goes into minute details on various facets of theatre design and in particular on the technical aspects of illusion, scene shifting and special effects. It is a treasure of useful information and it was as the basic guide for stage engineering throughout the baroque era

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[65] Goudar, *Relations Historiques du Divertissement de Carnaval de Naples*, (Lucca, 1774) - p.10

[66] N. Sabbattini, *Pratica di fabricar scene e machine ne'teatri* (Ravenna, 1638)

and beyond. Refining and perfecting stage machinery and equipment became a true obsession for the Italian theatre producers. Every season had to display something more exciting and imposing than the year before, and the imaginations of the designers seemed unlimited. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the Italians gradually moved away from the artificial lavishness. According to Burney, the drama became more focused on text and music, rather than on stage extravagance.[67]

For a long time, the Italian audience enjoyed the illusion. Nothing could bring them more delight than a moment of enchantment. Yet their attitude during the performances was very different than what was the custom elsewhere in Europe. A trip to the Italian opera house was a cultural activity at least as much as it was a grand social event. Today, the music-lover who pays a visit to the concert hall is accustomed to the conformist atmosphere of the nineteenth century. The Italian audience of the seventeenth and eighteenth century did certainly not match that ideal. Usually, the opera was the central event for the evening. The performances lasted all night long and different types of entertainment were provided in the salons of the theatre. Eating, drinking, playing cards, discussing political or current issues, calling in on one box after another and carrying on amorous affairs were as much part of the experience as was hearing and acknowledging the preferred *primo uomo* or *prima donna*. In Venice, some of the boxes could even be closed with blinds so the party was shut off from the stage. If someone wasn't interested in the opera they could go to the back rooms to gamble or play cards for a while and come back at the time

[67] Burney, *Dr. Burney's Musical Tours in Europe* – p. 277 [Burney gives a comparison of French and Italian theatre.]

when the lead singer was about to perform an important aria. The Count d'Espinchal visited the San Carlo in Naples to see Paisiello's *Pirro*. He beheld the following scene:

> "They only listen to one scene in the entire opera […] The rest of the time is spent in visits from one box to another, as is usual in Italy. There is a lot of noise in the auditorium, with everyone talking loudly, except during the principal ballet. Then there is total silence and they all listen and watch."[68]

Rich families or members of the governing board of the theatre would rent a box for a year at a time. Every box could be decorated to the occupier's own taste. Some aristocrats placed mirrors all around the box so they could glance at the stage from any corner while they were busying themselves with other activities. Visiting the opera also played a great a part in entertaining guests. Being invited to join a family in their theatre box was a customary social occasion. The corridors along the boxes constantly saw servants running up and down. Buffet tables were set up and little kitchens installed to re-heat the food they brought. Staircases and passageways were consequently overcrowded and dirty.

The ground pit of the opera was reserved for tickets bought the night of the performance, usually to middle and lower class people who could afford the theatre. Venice was famous for the diversity of public it attracted to the theatres. Workmen, craftsmen, gondoliers and lower clergy all occupied the pit and joined in with the pleasures of the nobility. Their laughter, whistling, shouting and rowdy unruliness was part of the experience. Witnesses relate that public order was completely ignored. The nobles became accustomed to spitting down from their boxes into the pit, to show their disdain for the ordinary people.

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[68] Le Comte d'Espinchal, *Journal d'émigration* - p. 85

Italian audiences were not only rude to one another but they also had no qualms about expressing their opinion regarding the action on stage. They never strained themselves to applaud when they did not like the performance, but they would visibly swoon and seemingly be dying of bliss when they saw something that pleasured the senses. In that case, they would burst out with passionate admiration as soon as the curtain fell, or at the end of an aria. They tossed verses and gifts at the castrato, buried the *prima donna* in flowers and flattering poetry while clapping deafeningly and shouting at the top of their lungs for an encore or the repeat of a favorite scene. Needless to say, the enthusiasm of the audience contributed greatly to the failure or success of a singer.

I.7: Castrati and Opera

The castrato was the focus star of the opera throughout the baroque. The crazed mania of the audience certainly added to the cultivation of the practice. As mentioned before, the act of castration was legally banned. Nonetheless, society and officials turned a blind eye, essentially in order to keep the art of castrato singing alive.

It was every singing boy's dream, castrato, tenor or bass, to become a star at the opera. Unfortunately, that career was reserved for singers of top-notch quality and talent. Mostly, they ended up in churches around the country, or at second-rate theatres in small towns. As mentioned, during the course of the seventeenth century theatres sprung everywhere in Italy. Every small town had a theatre and many of the larger cities had several. Castrati especially wanted to work in the theatre to escape the dullness of a life in forced priesthood and rigid church customs. The Church forbade them to marry, so the odds of having a normal life in worldly society were limited. In the eighteenth century, the situation became so severe that the church choirs had to make do with the mere refuse of the conservatorios. Burney complains amply of the bad singing he heard in Italian churches. In Brescia, he attended a service at the church of the Jesuits. He heard a castrato, which he thought was very agreeable, but he did not enjoy

the other singers: “There was a young counter-tenor, of whom little is to be said; a tenor, less, and a bass that drove me out of the church.”[69]

Usually, when the young castrati were ready for professional life, the conservatorio would lend their assistance in finding a suitable position as a church singer, or help to arrange for auditions at various theatres. In accordance with a peculiar Italian custom, most castrati would assume a stage name. Often this name would refer to the patron family the castrato was taken in by. This was the singer’s way of showing his gratitude. For example, the Neapolitan “Farina” brothers adopted Carlo Broschi. Consequently, he called himself “Farinelli”, but the public also granted him the name of “il ragazzo” or “il bambino”. Other singers would assume pseudonyms referring to their hometown. Francesco Bernardi, for example, born in Siena, assumed the name “Senesino”, or Melchiorri, who was born at Aquila in Abruzzo, took the name “L’Aquilano”, although he was also known as “il Cacciacuori”, which translates as “the slayer of hearts”. These aliases were spoken in the same breath as the Christian names they were given and both names usually appeared on programs and posters. Not only castrati, but female singers, tenors and basses also assumed stage names.

Due to the exclusion of (physical) puberty, some castrati made their operatic début at a frighteningly young age: Farinelli at fifteen, Cafarelli at sixteen, and Nicolino, at barely twelve years old when he first appeared in the theatre. It was not unusual for a castrato to accept a role in the opera while he was still studying at the conservatorio. Often, when a *maestro* realized that a boy had superior talents compared to the average students, he would set up a

[69] Burney, *Dr. Burney’s Musical Tours in Europe* - vol. I, p. 89

contract with a local theatre. Thus, in most cases, a castrato's début came about when his *maestro* pronounced him ready for the stage. By this time, he already had considerable experience singing solo with the church choir in mass and during other religious events. Usually, he had been filling in with the theatre choirs and at private concerts as well.

Natural male voices were, in general, exceptionally neglected in Italian baroque opera. According to Heriot, seventy percent of all male singers in the eighteenth century were castrati.[70] It was not until the last few decades that individual male voices gained some fame, namely, with the tenors Raaff and Fabri. Heriot continues to argue that male voices were possibly not popular for the simple reason that they were not trained well enough to suit the desires of the audience, as the public taste was accustomed to the brilliance and virtuosity of the castrati.[71] In puberty, the male vocal chords will thicken considerably. Consequently, they loose a great deal of the flexibility inherent to child voices before mutation. Most of the voice training clearly favored castrato singing and the methods were aimed at high voices. This might imply that tenors and basses were starved of opportunity to learn the technique at the conservatorios. The Italians found the bass and tenor sound to be coarse and unrefined. However, it seems that the natural male voice had advanced to more significance from the end of the seventeenth century onwards. Tenors were usually consigned to singing the parts of old men (later attributed to basses), while basses were often

[70] Heriot - p. 31

[71] This argument is comparable with Rosselli's reasoning why women were, at first, not popular as opera singers at first. Both men recognize the huge importance of the castrati's training and consider this aspect of their lives to be the most important issue in their ability to triumph over all other singers in Italy and abroad.

reserved for impressive special effects, such as announcements of oracles or for god-like creatures. Surely, high voices were the most expensive to hire (first the castrati, then the women). Tenors and basses were a lot cheaper. If natural male voices appeared on the cast list for minor roles, it is reasonable to assume that this might have been a cost-efficient decision on the impresario's part.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, women performers gained considerable ground in the Italian theatre world. Female vocalists such as Francesca Cuzzoni, De Amicis, Margarita Durastanti or Faustina Bordoni were certainly admired on the same level as some of the great castrati and they received countless successes all over Europe. The castrati formed a substantial competition for female singers, yet they did not feel threatened in the same way by the *prime donne*. The castrati occupied a very special place in the heart of the audience and their vocal preeminence was generally far superior to that of the women.

The rivalry between castrati and *prime donne* is illustrated in many anecdotes. Since the female singers saw the castrati as a particular threat to their repertoire, they had no qualms about throwing tantrums and making life extremely difficult for the *primo uomo*. La Gabrielli, for example, was notorious for her disagreeable ways. During a production in Naples's season of 1766, she came to sing face to face with the castrato Mazzanti. At first, she refused to sing a duet with him; such a musical union would have been far beneath her. Forced to sing the duet anyway, she proceeded to invent a variety of vocal embellishments, premeditated to "demolish" her colleague. Mazzanti begged her to obey the score, but she shouted in front of everybody: "Follow me, anyone who can!" The star repeated her humiliating act every night, until it eventually

backfired. During one of the last shows, she got so lost in an intricate web of ornaments and vocalises that she couldn't save herself any more. She left the stage in tears without finishing the duet.[72]

Yet the castrati were not without such weapons themselves. When Pachierotti first met the infamous *prima donna* De Amicis, she asked him to learn his role well, if he was capable of it, since she had no time to waste. She refused to even once run through the duet with him, assuring him that the dress rehearsal would be sufficient. On opening night, De Amicis expected that the duet would devastate him completely. The audience received her first entry with great enthusiasm. Pachierotti followed her. Right away, the spectators were fascinated with his extraordinary voice. The soprano, feeling she was loosing ground, ensued to apply all vocal spins and tricks she had up her sleeve. Yet, the castrato outdid her with a unique style of ornamenting, using new trills, appoggiaturas and effective eruptions of pathos. In her turn, the diva followed him in this new style. Together, they gave the Palermo audience an unforgettable experience. It is said that since that night, she had nothing but appreciation and fondness for the castrato[73].

Naturally, the castrati were amply envious of one another. After all, they competed for the same contracts and desired the same privileges. They all fought for the most reverend places in the hall of fame. Cafarelli had a reputation for being very demanding, moody and temperamental. All who worked with the famous castrato feared his tantrums, as his aggression was known to turn violent at times. On one occasion, he was to sing a duet with the castrato Reginella in

[72] Barbier - pp. 145-46
[73] Ibid. - p. 147

the church of the Donna Regina in Naples. The reason of the dispute was never known, but the two castrati got into a vehement argument during the performance. It must have been quite a sight to see the eunuchs squabble like two tramps in the middle of a religious service. Ultimately, Cafarelli knocked Reginella out and the latter had to be taken out of the church. Such a deed was liable to be punished by serving time in prison, but the one held accountable was so cherished by the opera fans that the king granted him exculpation.[74]

Not all castrati were on resentful terms with one another, though. In 1734, two of the time's most celebrated castrati, Senesino and Farinelli, both found themselves living in London. It was decided to bring these two majestic pillars of opera together on stage in an opera called *Artaserse*, composed by Hasse and Farinelli's brother, Riccardo Broschi. This production was to be the crown piece of the London musical season and promised to be an enormous success from the start. At the first rehearsal, the orchestra was so startled by the amazing voice of Farinelli that they forgot to play. On opening night, a famous incident occurred, which Burney recorded:

> "Senesino had the part of the furious tyrant, and Farinelli that of an unfortunate hero in chains; but in the course of the first air, the captive so softened the heart of the tyrant, that Senesino, forgetting his stage character, ran to Farinelli and embraced him in his own."[75]

This was the first, and probably one of the only instances that a castrato was seen bestowing so much praise and admiration upon another castrato in public.

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[74] Heriot - p. 144
[75] Burney, Ch., *Dr. Burney's Musical Tours in Europe* - vol. I, p. 157

I.8: Life of the Castrati in Society

The life of castrati has been documented in several modern oeuvres, notably in the movie "Farinelli",[76] picturing the life of one of the most famous castrati the world ever knew. The truthfulness of many of the episodes in the story can be debated, but as a movie the work is very entertaining and contains many of the different aspects of a castrato's life. The book "Cry to Heaven" by Anne Rice depicts the fictitious life of Tonio Treschi and his *maestro,* Guido Maffeo.[77] The book is particularly convincing. Much attention is paid to the accuracy of the historic details, which makes it a wonderful novel and a very enjoyable read.

The social company of opera singers was in general well-liked in high society. Going to the theatre was part of daily life for the upper classes and their associations with the artists was no less of a status symbol with which they impressed their friends. The castrati were invited to receptions, social gathering, hunting parties, dinners, gallant afternoons, soirees, dances and so on. For the castrati who sang in the theatre life was far from boring.

The Italians truly adored their opera singers and especially the castrati. For the most admired stars, people would lapse into collective scenes of mass

[76] *Farinelli*, a film by Gérard Corbiau (Belgium/France/Italy, Sony Pictures Classics: 1994)
[77] A. Rice, *A Cry to Heaven* (Knopf, New York: 1982)

hysteria and women would throw themselves at the singers' feet. They were considered angels on the one hand, but ridiculed for their physical condition on the other. Overall, castrati were destined to lead a lonely life. They had been taken away from family life at an early age only to be brought up under the severe regime of the conservatorio. Within the school, they had little chance of establishing close friendships. Amongst themselves, the castrati saw envy and competition stand in the way and the regular student wanted little to do with them. If they were fortunate, they were able to establish a close bond with their *maestro*.

Once they reached adulthood, the Church forbade them to get married because they could not father children. Many stories, some of passionate tragedy, others of cunning deception relate of castrati who sincerely fell in love. One castrato, Bartolomeo de Sorlisi, engaged in a heroic crusade to get permission to marry the woman he loved, a German girl called Dorothea Lichtwer. They were joined in wedlock clandestinely, without papal authorization. When the secret got out, the pope revoked the union. After much debating forth and back, intervention of the nobility and years of petitions and rejections, the pope ultimately agreed to let the marriage stand. Yet not all castrati were so lucky. Many who fell in love were never granted permission to get married and they led a life of frustration and loneliness. Cortona, for example, was determined to marry the attractive female singer, Barbaruccia. Both musicians were in the service of the Duke of Mantua. In a desperate attempt to convince the pope, Cortona fabricated the story that his childhood operation had been

carried out badly, and that he was therefore able to father offspring.[78] Even the duke had given authority to the plea, but the pope refused incessantly that the two be joined in matrimony. He simply stated that the castrato should have had himself castrated more efficiently. Seemingly, to recompense for the fact that marriage was not allowed, the Church encouraged the castrati to become priests, especially if they were already attached to a church choir. Naturally, it was in their advantage if the employees were religious people, firstly, to avoid unnecessary scandals, but also to have them in full ecclesiastic service and commit them to the Church for life.

As a general rule, castrati were immensely popular with the ladies. In the modern world, it is quite typical for famous pop stars or actors to be viewed as sex symbols and it was no different in the Baroque. Women lay at the feet of these refined, charming opera stars, and worshipped them in every way imaginable.[79] The ladies would wear miniature portraits of their favorite castrato as necklaces, decorations on their shoes or fixed in brooches and bracelets. They imparted them with expensive gifts and flattering poetry and offered flowers and laurel wreaths after performances. It is a strange, if not intriguing, paradox to have emasculated men inspire such fervent and passionate feelings in the opposite sex. In spite of their operation, there was never any reason to believe that castrati were sexually incapable. On the contrary, they were supposed to be

[78] This story was most certainly a lie, as a badly carried out castration of that kind would have resulted in hormonal changes during puberty, and Cortona would never have had a career as a soprano.

[79] Except in France, where the ladies thought of castrati with nothing but disgust and aversion – Barbier - p. 136

magnificent lovers, driving women mad with passion and excitement.[80] The fact that they had "something missing" didn't seem to bother either party. Castration certainly influenced sexual desire, but the outcome in any one person could not be predicted. The aspect of sexuality certainly remained present.[81] Their lack of hormonal development obviously led to the inability to impregnate women, so for comprehensible reasons they were the absolute ideal lovers. Some castrati were even notorious lady-killers. They turned husbands into cuckolds, kept intimate relationships with the aristocracy, indulged in the life of being some rich widow's protégé or cunningly seduced the innocent young daughters of noblemen.

The great Cafarelli is undoubtedly the most infamous castrato as far as amorous escapades go. Although he had the reputation of being temperamental and contemptuous, the females in the audience adored him and found no effort too great to stir his interest in them. Cafarelli's interests went out to many ladies over the years and his romantic liaisons were a constant source of gossip and intrigue. For a long time, he maintained an intimate affair with an aristocratic lady in Rome. Unfortunately, her husband caught wind of what was going on and tried to catch them by surprise. The castrato escaped via a window and had to hide in the garden all night long. He caught a cold and was bedridden for a month. After the first failure, the husband tried to ensnare Cafarelli again. For a second time, the singer made a phenomenal escape. Since that instance, he never went out of his house in Rome by himself anymore. The noble woman, still

[80] Since the private life of the castrati is but sparsely documented, one has to rely on rumours and assumptions for this statement.

[81] For a detailed discussion on the castrati and the sexual aspects of their physical maturation, see Fritz, H., *Kastratengesang*, Hans Schneider: Tutzing (1994) – pp. 60-70 [Chapter II.4.1: "Zur Endokrinologie"]

very much in love with the castrato, hired four men to escort him everywhere and protect him against any possible threats.[82]

Not all the anecdotes have happy endings, though. Another story concerns the affair of Siface, a castrato from Bologna, with a local aristocrat's widowed sister. The affair displeased the family and they hastily moved her into the convent of San Lorenzo. The castrato, however, found a way into the building, and they continued their passionate business where they had left off. Unfortunately, Siface was foolish enough to boast about his adventures to anyone ready to listen. The word got to her brother, who was infuriated. Promptly, the family had the singer arrested. On May 29, 1697, when Siface was only 44 years old, Marchese Marsili's men assassinated the castrato on the road between Ferrara and Bologna.[83]

There exists some kind of myth that, "by nature", castrati carried on homosexual relations. Since childhood, they were submerged in a male dominated world, but there is no reason to suppose that this automatically influenced them in their sexual orientation. In Anne Rice's "Cry to Heaven" the idea is suggested that castrati were almost automatically homosexual. Surely, there is reason to believe that some of them were inclined that way, but there is no certain proof that this was part of every castrato's life. Yet it is documented that many young castrati were "kept" by priests, *monsignori*, cardinals or other ecclesiastic officials. In the context of the period it is admissible to suppose that these close relationships were far from chaste. Casanova perceived that a young castrato lived under the protection of cardinal Borghese in Rome and took

[82] Heriot - p. 143
[83] Barbier - p. 40

dinner with him every night, in private.[84] Another story concerns the castrato Cortona. After his multiple requests for marriage to Barbarucci were revoked by the pope he became the favorite of Gian-Gastone de' Medici, son of Cosimo III, a friendship which became the subject of much gossiping. It is hard in these cases, and in similar ones, to determine how far the relationship went. Homosexuality was not only taboo in those days, it was also decidedly illegal. None of the private journals or diaries of the castrati or their entourage elaborate on men beyond the level of "having close friendships", whereas some of the stories involving women were disclosed opulently. This silence could therefore just be attributed to self-protection. A situation that met with a lot of speculation, for example, was the friendship between Farinelli and the poet/librettist Metastasio. They frequently addressed each other as "Adorable twin", "Incomparable twin", "Most amiable twin", or with equivalent titles of affection. After a period of silence between the two, Metastasio wrote to the castrato:

> "Are the words you write so valuable then, that one cannot aspire to receive them without first sighing after them during several Olympiads? Barbarian, ungrateful man, Hyrcanian tiger, deaf asp, cheetah, Apulian tarantula! For so many months, it has not occurred to you to let me know if you are alive!"[85]

The two men wrote letters to each other consistently, but unfortunately, only the letters from the poet to the singer have survived. Having met in Naples at a young age, they grew together in a deeply affectionate bond that lasted their entire life. Their writings never revealed anything explicit. According to Barbier,

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[84] Casanova, *The Story of my Life*, Marsilio Publishers: New York (2000) - p. 41
[85] P. Metastasio, *Lettere disperse e inedite a cura di Giousé Carducci* (Zanichelli, Bologna: 1883) – Letter of 28 May 1749

their love and fondness was purely based on a brotherly connection.[86] The thought must have crossed the two men's minds, though. Perhaps it was even a source of concern as can be read through the lines of the following passage:

> "I cannot express myself better than by telling you that I love you as much as Farinelli deserves that love. But let us cease these tender words, lest some malignant person accuses us of some deception, like those that help to console an intolerant desire for honesty, for friendship that is affectionate, true and disinterested."[87]

Whether this relationship was indeed platonic, or whether the two had a secret passion for each other, is debatable. The correspondence shows in every written line a portion of their life and is in itself a great illustrating document of the time. Twins at heart, the two men died in the same year, 1782, only a few months apart.

[86] Barbier - p. 157
[87] Metastasio, *Lettere disperse…* - Letter of 26 August 1749

I.9: Sexual Ambiguity

As much as in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, Italian theatre eagerly employed the travesty feature on stage. The fact that women were completely forbidden to perform in the theatres in the Papal States led to the custom of men cross-dressing on stage in this region and beyond. This crossing of the genders contributed to the feminization of male actors, in opera, drama and ballet alike. There seems to be no problem for the public to imagine a woman being a man or a man being a woman. They understood and accepted the disguises that never went amiss in a baroque spectacle and even admired them. The spice of sexual double-entendre seemed to inspire the Italian audience and piqued their fascination with the opera stars. It might also have aroused them in other ways.

In the beginning of operatic theatre, it seems that castrati were mainly seen playing women's parts. From the very birth of the genre, the audience had encountered castrati in gender-crossing roles. They had the particular advantage of their youthful, feminine physical appearance. It is no secret that the castrati played this confusion of the sexes as a trump card, electrifying both the female and the male audience with their enticing act. None other than the infamous Casanova was captivated by their androgynous allure and the polymorphous sexuality of their bearings. He visited Rome in 1762, and observed the following scene of *far da donna*, or a man playing a woman's character:

> "We went to the Aliberti theatre, where the castrato who took the *prima donna*'s role attracted all the town. […] In a well-made corset, he had the waist of a nymph, and, what was almost incredible, his breast was in no way inferior, either in form or in beauty, to any woman's; and it was above all by this means that the monster made such ravages. Though one knew the negative nature of this unfortunate, curiosity made one glance at his chest, and an inexpressible charm acted upon one, so that you were madly in love before you realized it. To resist the temptation, or not to feel it, one would have to be cold and earthbound as a German. When he walked about the stage during the *ritornello* of the aria he was to sing, his step was majestic and at the same time voluptuous; and when he favoured the boxes with his glances, the tender and modest rolling of his black eyes brought a ravishment to the heart. It was obvious that he hoped to inspire the love of those who liked him as a man, and probably would not have done so as a woman." [88]

Yet, when women succeeded to be accepted as equal partners on stage, the roles were also reversed. Women would not only play the parts of the main female characters, they also played male roles. Italian opera had a particular fondness for these illusions, and the spectacle wouldn't have meant half as much if it hadn't been for the vivid imagination of the audience. In Cavalli's *Eliogabalo*, the parts for Eliogabalo, Allessandro and Cesare were written for a soprano and the part of Zenia (a female part) was sung by a tenor. In 1737, for the opening of the San Carlo theatre in Naples, Sarro set Metastasio's *Achille in Sciro* to music. The drama required that Achilles disguise himself as a woman during most of the show, only to reveal himself in his true identity at the end. For the opening night, the singer engaged to act Achilles was Vittoria Tesi, a renowned soprano of the time. The revelation at the end became a totally absurd play on "double reversed sexes". Vittoria generally refused to play male roles, on the grounds that it was harmful for her health[89] and she had only accepted this role because she was appearing on stage as a male disguised as a female. Another famous individual

[88] Casanova, *The Story of my Life* - p. 499
[89] Yet she never explained exactly what harm it did.

was Maria Cerè, who was said to be so ugly that she was never allowed to sing female parts.

Cross-dressing became a true vogue all over Italy. During his Roman sojourn in 1788, Goethe observed that the carnival was an excuse for everybody to indulge in the amusement of gender deception. He made the following observation:

> "The masks now begin to multiply. Young men, dressed in the holiday attire of the women of the lowest classes, exposing an open breast and exposing an impudent self-complacency, are mostly the first to be seen. They caress the men, allow themselves all familiarities with the women they encounter, as being persons the same as themselves and for the rest do whatever humor, wit or wantonness suggest."[90]

Like the men who dressed up in women's clothing during the carnival season, the castrati quite frequently went around dressed as women in everyday life. It emphasized on the entire issue of sexual mystification and teasing ambiguity. Due to the lack of secondary male features, many castrati had ambiguously feminine looks. Their appearance alone could render a person puzzled. Even Casanova was the innocent confused party in 1745. He related:

> "[…] an abbé with an attractive face walked in [to a café]. At the appearance of his hips, I took him for a girl in disguise, and I said so to the abbé Gama; but the latter told me that it was Beppino della Mamana, a famous castrato. The abbé called him over, and told him, laughing, that I had taken him for a girl. The impudent creature, looking fixedly at me, told me that if I liked he would prove that I was right, or that I was wrong."[91]

Furthermore, Casanova relates the story of his encounter with Bellino a year previous in Ancona.[92] Bellino turned out to be a young woman masquerading as

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[90] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Travels in Italy* (G. Bell and Sons, London: 1892) – translated from German by the Rev. A.J.W. Morisson and Charles Nesbit, pp. 98-99
[91] Casanova, *The Story of My Life* - pp. 323-36
[92] Ibid. - pp. 85-108 [Chapters V and VI]

a castrato who dresses as a girl. Naturally, comical confusions ensued when the girl and her sisters tried to convince the philanderer that she was a boy. Certainly, the flirtatious teasing about her true gender stirred Casanova's arousal. He eventually admitted that he had fallen in love with her, not even knowing for sure if she was woman or man.

I.10: Castrati Abroad

As a practice, castration for the purpose of voice preservation only happened in Italy. Yet Italian opera, including the art of the castrati, was immensely popular all over the continent. The rich theatres could afford to hire the best singers to join their company and perform in the popular *opera seria.* This brought along a need to export Italian singers and especially castrati, Italy's most unique "vocal product". Some castrati were sent to courts abroad at an early age, mainly to fulfill needs in the chapel choirs. Although the practice was scorned everywhere else in Europe, the singers were welcomed triumphantly.

In Vienna, the nobility spontaneously loved the castrati. Viennese musical life was as active in the eighteenth century as it ever was. Here too, the popularity of the castrati was mainly encouraged by the recognition of Italian opera. Metastasio lived in Vienna for no less than fifty years, creating the majority of his masterworks in that city. Christoph Willibald von Gluck took Metastasio's tragedy to create a musical drama with his *Orfeo ed Euridice* in 1762, the first of the so-called "reform" operas and the trend setter for the operas of the Enlightenment. The work was premiered with the castrato Guadagni in the role of *Orfeo*. Mozart met Vincenzo del Pato in Vienna and created the role of *Idamante* in *Idomeneo* for him, which was produced in Munich. Sometime later, he heard Rauzzini sing, again in Vienna, and was so ecstatic over his voice that he immediately offered him the role of the *primo uomo* in the Milan creation of

Lucio Silva. Shortly after that, he composed his famous *Exsultate Jubilate* for the castrato.

How the castrati were recognized in France is a somewhat complex issue. Many different sources have kept account of the precise casting of voices and it is clear that France distinguished between four different kinds of *dessus* singers: women, boys, falsetto singers and castrati.[93] Yet the employment of castrati is a not a subject the French liked to write about. In general, it was well known that the French were not fond of these singers whom they called "cripples"; they found the practice both unwarranted and immoral, and the personalities grotesque. In a letter of 1659, Pierre Perrin describes the Italian eunuchs as follows:

> "… they [the castrati] are the horror of the ladies, the laughing stock of men, one moment expected to play Cupid, the next a lady, and to express amorous passions, which offends against our sense of the plausible, good taste and every dramatic convention."[94]

Yet is a proven fact that castrati were present in France all through the eighteenth, and even into the nineteenth century. Sawkins illustrates his case with detailed employment figures from c. 1650 until 1765, of the different castrati.[95] The list clarifies that all these (Italian) singers performed in religious motets as well as the operas of Lully and Rameau. According to a source cited by the Bêche brothers, no less than twenty-four castrati served the needs of the *Chapelle Royale* and they also performed on the operatic stage at the same

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[93] L. Sawkins, "For and Against the Order of Nature: Who sang the soprano?", *Early Music* (August 1987) - p. 315 – Sawkins gives a full account of the different categories, and tackles the problems that come with each of them.
[94] As quoted by Sawkins - p. 320
[95] Ibid. - p. 319

time.[96] These castrati lived together in a fine-looking villa in Montreuil, on the outskirts of Versailles. Antonio Bagnieri, a castrato who served the French court from c.1650 until 1715, had built the house for himself and his Italian colleagues.

Besides the singers residing in France, many of the famous castrati traveled to France on musical missions to sing in the *Concert Spirituel*, or perform privately for the royal family. Farinelli knew great success and was admired for his extremely agile voice. He visited France for the first time in 1737 and returned in 1752. Cafarelli enjoyed great recognition after his performance in 1754. The French allegedly showered him with gifts and he was granted special privileges during this stay in Paris. Antonio Albanese was the most regular guest on the French scene. He sang no less than twenty-one concerts in 1753 and another twenty-one during the ten years subsequent. No descriptions of his performances survived, but the frequency of his appearance must indicate a certain degree of popularity. In 1805, while the French occupied parts of Northern Italy, Napoleon heard Crescentini sing and was so captivated by his voice that he persuaded him to move to France. The singer accepted the invitation and remained there for six years. He dominated the theatre of the Tuileries in a way no castrato had done before. Ironically, Crescentini, one of the last great castrati, was the first to conquer the French stage.

The moral standpoint of the French was, more than anything, what stood in between the castrati and the audience. A famous quote from Jean-Jacques Rousseau states that the blame lies with the parents who “allowed their children to undergo this operation for the enjoyment of pleasure-loving and cruel people

[96] Original text found in a manuscript by *les frêres* Bêche, *Receuil de Manuscrit*, Paris, Bibliothèque National, Rés.F.1661, pp.106 – as stated by Sawkins - p. 323.

who dare to seek out the singing of these unfortunate men."[97] Sarah Goudar, who married a Frenchman and thereby adopted much of the French philosophy, turned violently against the "Italian eunuchs". In 1773, she wrote:

> "It is humiliating for the most enlightened century there ever was to see the deplorable state in which operas have been reduced, especially the Italian ones, in which the least drawback is possible of seeing the Alexanders, Ceasars or Pompeys order the destiny of the universe with the voices of little girls."[98]

Being as morally and politically outspoken as she was, Sarah Goudard was also one of the first people to openly address the moral corruption of justifying castration. She attacked the practice with a fundamental question: "Must we mutilate men in order to give them a perfection they did not possess at birth?"[99]

Another reason for the French repugnance of castrati might be found in the difference between the musical styles of the two countries. Italian music, as stated before, moved into a highly ornamented style at the beginning of the seventeenth century, with increasing degree of virtuosity. It proved to be an increasingly demanding task for the singer. The French style of the *tragédie lyrique*, established by Lully in the late 1600s, concentrated much more on text, simplicity and musical grace. Spectacular vocal acts, such as long and intricate runs, flamboyant cadenzas and endlessly spun-out ornamentations were not the order of the day in French music. Embellishments were certainly frequent, but the style of ornamenting was discrete and elegant. The melodies of French music were patterned on a more restricted tessitura, with shorter phrases. By

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[97] Rousseau, J.-J., *Dictionaire de Musique*, Oeuvres Complètes, vol. 12, Paris: 1819 – transl. by Willliam Waring in1779 [see entry for *castrato*]
[98] Goudar, *Remarques sur la Musique et la dance* [section: *Avertissement*]
[99] Ibid. - p. 29

and large, the French style was less vocally demanding than the Italian one as far as *fioriture* and *agilità* went. In Italy, the castrati led the field in vocal technique, so low male voices and women had been forced to catch up and learn to compete with the flashy skills of the eunuchs. In France, vocal technique and training had almost been ignored. Towards the start of nineteenth century, as Rossini made a name in Italy, virtuoso *bel canto* singing was rising to its absolute climax. France was at least fifty years behind its European neighbors. Since they did not welcome castrati in their theatres as eagerly as other places in Europe, French vocalists were not compelled to compete in the same way. Consequently, this neglect of the art became a source of criticism and mockery. When Casanova saw the famous Nicole Le Maure sing, he thought she was mad thinking she could do anything but "scream". When the German baron de Grimm heard her, he exclaimed:

> "Singing, a term shamefully profaned in France, applied to a method of forcing sounds out of the throat and shattering them against the teeth by a convulsive movement of the chin; we call that shouting!"[100]

Mozart was equally unflattering about French singing. When he witnessed the singers of the *Académie Royale,* he merely declared that they howled through their noses and throats, with all the power their lungs could muster.[101]

In London, the story was much different. The English received the castrati with some reluctance at first, but with the arrival of the *opera seria* on the London music scene, the English audience warmed to the style of the Italian eunuchs. Some castrati had performed privately for the aristocracy during the course of the

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[100] Grimm, baron de, *Correspondance littéraire, philsophique et critique, 1753-1782* (Paris: 1813) – as quoted in Barbier - p. 190
[101] Barbier - p. 190

seventeenth century, but there was some reservation concerning these eccentric characters. With the arrival of Handel and the founding of the Royal Academy of Musick in 1719, London became a great capital for Italian singers and certainly for castrati. England had a commendable vocal tradition, but disapproved harshly of the practice of castration. Therefore, castrati from Italy were brought in. A more detailed account of the castrati's life in England will be presented in the context of the Royal Academy of Musick.

Although the castrati traveled all over Europe, the phenomenon was and remained a purely Italian feature. In the context of the theatre, the castrati were popular everywhere (though least so in France). Yet, the practice of castration was looked upon as brutal, immoral, cruel and inhuman everywhere outside the Italian peninsula. Both Germany and England had great traditions of church choirs, but for the high parts, they worked with boys or hired falsettists. The idea of castration never found its way into their educational system, although the concept of "choir schools" was equivalent to the Italian conservatorio system. Naturally, the pope's influence did not stretch to the institutions of the Protestant or Anglican churches. However, they could have profited from having castrati for their church choirs as well. Possibly the northern European moral principles were more progressive, or the sheer actuality of being an outside witness was enough to trigger the conscience and spur the rejection of the practice. Still, it remains a highly interesting debate to contemplate exactly why the Italians were able to flout that ethical dilemma in order to give way to one of the most extraordinary musical trends the vocal world has ever known.

I.11: Folding of the Castrato's Reign

Towards the end of the eighteenth and during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the castrati lost their prominent position in the operatic world with surprising swiftness. A culmination of circumstances contributed to this; social issues, moral awareness, philosophical influences, political changes and a transformation in musical taste are among the main factors.

From 1798 until 1815, the French occupied Italy and commanded much of the North, including the Papal States. They abducted Pope Pius VI, inforced their own laws and thereby also banned the practice of castration. The writers of the Enlightenment were very outspoken about their moral viewpoint on the matter. It was only logical that the growing awareness of human rights also affected the Italian people. The international pressure, caused by the bad press on the Italian community for facilitating the castration practice, impelled the people to adapt to a more widely acceptable moral standard. In an effort to discourage this barbarous Italian tradition, Napoleon no longer permitted castrated boys to be accepted in the conservatorios. After 1815, he hoped that this law would hold ground and that the church would not seek to bring back the custom. However, he was wrong. Though the rage for castrati was definitely subdued, as soon as the Congress of Vienna arranged for the Papal States to be restored to the pope's command, the church choir traditions were revived and the practice was quickly reinstated.

During the French occupation, the castrati had lost considerable ground in the opera field. The nearly 25-year standstill had created a sizeable gap in the continuation of the castrato's art, as virtually no operations had been carried out. Consequently, the overall demand had much declined. In 1769, the papal ban on women performing on stage had been lifted. This rendered the female singers more ambitious and opened up opportunities to provide better musical education and a more thorough vocal training for women. Gluck and Mozart already expressed a preference for female singers and in early Romanticism the leading parts in the opera were forever transferred to the *prima donna* and the tenor. Public taste had adjusted accordingly. Since 1815, boys were solely castrated to sing their part in the Papal States' church choirs. No longer supported by the crowd's blind desire to hear the castrati in the theatre, the contention of the church rapidly decayed.

Another major contributor to the downfall of the castrati was the crumbling of the conservatorio institutions. Whereas the seventeenth century had proven to be a glorious era for the schools, the eighteenth century brought but little reward. In 1744, the Neapolitan conservatorio of the Poveri di Gesù Cristo went bankrupt after a period of poor administration and internal rebellion of the *figlioli*. Various other schools in Italy followed over the next few decades. Ultimately, the entire system collapsed by about 1790. By then, the good castrato teachers had fled the scene of the badly organized establishments, and what was left of the highly disciplined company, was a few second-rate singers and musicians who were neither qualified or able to teach the students the fundamentals of using the voice. The fall of the conservatorios was a momentous event in the history of Italian singing. The schools had been the icon of the castrato's training;

epitomized as a crucial fortress in their vocal education. In essence, they provided the foundation for the supremacy of the castrato's voice. What was left of the Neapolitan conservatorios eventually had to merge into a single school. This last straw pushed the destabilization of the Neapolitan musical authorities over the edge. The city had lost its command and the collapse affected the musical forces over the entire country.

The last great castrati were Girolamo Crescentini (1762-1846) and Giovanni Battista Velutti (1781-1861). Both castrati had flourishing careers and enjoyed successes all over Europe. A young Schopenhauer, who heard Crescentini in Vienna, acknowledged:

> "His beautiful supernatural voice cannot be compared to that of any woman: there can be no fuller and more beautiful tone, and in its silver purity he yet achieves an indescribable power..."[102]

Crescentini stood out in a time when most composers alienated themselves from the castrati, marking them as unnatural and too disconnected from vocal and physical authenticity. Rossini had, in fact, a preference for castrati, but social and ethical pressure forced him to write the high parts in his operas for women. Furthermore, his personal encounter with castrati had not been positive. In 1813, he offered the title role of his opera *Aureliano in Palmira* to Velutti, the latter being in the full blossoming of his career. Yet the two men did not get along and the artistic collaboration was soon ended. It appears that Rossini and Velutti were in constant debate over the score, since the castrato devotedly applied profuse ornamentation to the music. Yet, the first Italian composers of the romantic era had taken the habit of writing out their scores in the way they

[102] As quoted by Heriot - p. 119

wanted them to be performed; in other words, already fully ornamented.[103] Velutti's attempt to "improve" was, in Rossini's eyes, nothing more than an insult to his very own composition. This new trend in composition also meant that a singer's ability to produce music maintained by of his (or her) personal caprices, showing embellishments that suited their individual style and voice, was no longer relevant. Virtuosity and vocal flexibility had become qualities of every thriving singer; it was no longer solely accredited to the magical talents of the castrati.

Velutti, at nineteen years younger, had an even tougher time than Crescentini. His halcyon days ended in the 1820s, when Meyerbeer composed a role for him in his opera *Crociati in Egitto* of 1824. Though the opera traveled from Italy to England and knew great success in both countries, Velutti was not the celebrated star his predecessors had been. The audience, no longer accustomed to the sound of the male soprano, perceived an eccentricity, a curiosity to be admired, yet not encouraged. The castrato retired from the stage in 1831 and spent the rest of his life on his estate near Venice. Wishing the theatre adieu did not only mean the ending of his career. It also closed the door on a complete epoch in the history of opera.

Even though the theatre had utterly ceased to involve castrati by that time, the Vatican remained diligent about the tradition until 1870. The last two castrati of significance at the Papal chapel were Domenico Mustafà, who was castrated between 1835 and 1840, and Alessandro Moreschi, who had the operation

[103] By that time, the only moment where the singer was allowed true artistic freedom was the cadenza. This tradition held ground, both in vocal and instrumental music, for the better part of the first half of the nineteenth century.

around 1865. In 1870, the church lost its sovereign power and the new regime finally abolished the practice of castration. Eventually, the use of castrati in the Vatican choir was suspended under a papal decree in 1902. A picture taken in 1898 shows the twenty-eight members of the Sistine chapel, with seven castrati still among them. One by one, they departed. In 1913, a year after Mustafà's death, Moreschi was the last to retire. He died in 1922, a forgotten and ostracized symbol of three and a half centuries of the Vatican's musical history.[104] In his prime, Moreschi had been called the "Angel of Rome". On two occasions, the Vatican had his voice recorded for the Gramophone Company of London, once in 1902 and again in 1904. These historic recordings, which in due course appeared on a single CD,[105] substantiated one of the most disputed practices of Western musical life.

[104] The castrati were indeed hurriedly forgotten. In 1919, while Moreschi was still alive, Rogers wrote that castrati were "as extinct as the dodo". He also mentions "if there were a survivor of this sexless tribe, we might take interest in him as a freak, but should certainly consider him out of place in any dignified musical environment". Though he might have been plainly unaware of the surviving castrato, his attitude reflects the view of the musical world of the time. F. Rogers, "The Male Soprano", *The Musical Quarterly* (1919) – p. 413.

[105] "Allessandro Moreschi, The Last Castrato", Pearl Opal CD9823

Part II: Castrati in London

Handel and the First Royal Academy of Music (1720-1728)

II.1: Handel and the Singers of the Royal Academy

In baroque opera, the relationship between composer and singers was one of a very special nature. Steven LaRue spends the entire first chapter of his book *Handel and His Singers* discussing the cooperation between cast, librettist and composer.[106] The composers of the time left no secret about their feelings regarding the singers they worked with. Benedetto Marcello was all sarcasm. Gluck, on the other hand, complained incessantly, claiming that the attitude of the singers spoilt the whole merit of the *opera seria* and that their misguided pride gave the genre and its composers a bad name. It is certainly a fact that the so-called corruption of the aesthetics of opera was linked to the pressure the performers put on the composers, but the extent of this manipulation might in some cases have been exaggerated. LaRue emphasizes that the singers were the most important driving power of a production. He even suggests that often the music itself was of lesser importance than the cast performing it. The main

[106] S. LaRue, *Handel and His Singers, The Creation of the Royal Academy Operas, 1720-1728,* Clarendon Press: Oxford (1995) - pp. 1-7

reason to support this theory is the fact that in any one company, the well-liked singers were often engaged for several seasons and financial demands were usually met to ensure the continuation of their contracts. It was absolutely vital to hold on to the audience's idols to guarantee an equal success for the next season. It was also crucial that competitive theatres did not steal a star, for that would likewise mean a migration of fans.

So, was the singer indeed so much more precious than the composer? A potential answer lies in the fact that reports in journals and papers of the time talk much more about the performance of the singers than about the accomplishment of the composer. No doubt the interpretation of the vocalists is what caught the eye and pleased the ear. The German traveler, Johann Neimetz, heard Faustina sing in Venice. Her style of ornamention was particularly virtuosic and he concluded the following:

> "… but at the da capo repeat [she] introduced all kinds of *doublements* and *maniere* without taking the smallest liberties with the rhythm of the accompaniment; so that a composer sometimes finds his arias, in the mouths of their singers, far more beautiful and pleasing than in his own original conception." [107]

This is evidence that even the composers themselves realized; their success was largely dependant on the performing artists. Certainly, this is part of why certain singers gained such favorable privileges within the theatre.

Another reason can be found in the differences in salaries between the principal singers and the other members of the company, especially the composers, or the poets. This is a clear indication that their position within the production was valued at the highest level. In the estimated budget records of

[107] As quoted in LaRue, *Handel and His Singers*, p. 3 [from J. Neimetz, *Nachlese besonderer Nachrichten von Italien,* Leipzig (1726), transl. by Kees Vlaardingerbroek]

the Academy for the season 1721-22, the board had wanted to attract Faustina Bordoni to join the group. For her, they reckoned no less than £1500 for the duration of her contract,as much as they paid the castrato Senesino and about £400 more than the present *prima donna*, Margherita Durastanti. For the composition of the operas, only £400 was set aside. In comparison, the poets received £200.[108] These numbers may be a reflection of the idea that a singer's responsibility was considered much heavier than that of any other member of the company. Consequently, LaRue is right in being concerned about this fact. He reckons that if seventeenth and eighteenth century opera was primarily characterized by the people who performed it, as supposed to the people who wrote it, there are certain doubts to be had on the musical integrity of the composers. It is hard to determine the extent to which singers had a say in the musical composition of their arias and in the structure of the opera. The significance of casting a production lucratively is evident, but the actual influence of any single singer on any one composer is unclear. Yet it is perhaps safer to assume that at the composer's discretion amendments were made to accommodate wishes of certain vocalists, but that the essence of the composition was always a genuine product of the creative power of the composer. Therefore, the composition of arias might be seen as a collaborative product of the writing talent of the composer and the performance skill of the singer.

Another motive why it seems plausible that theatres were more interested in having a good band of singers rather than prioritizing the actual compositions

[108] Figures taken from Milhous and Hume, "New Light on Handel and the Royal Academy", *Theatre Journal* 35 (1983) - p. 163

lies in the way a company was established. As far as the Royal Academy in London goes, the instructions issued to Handel by the Duke of Newcastle in May 1719 clearly state that the objective is to establish a singing company:

> Instructions to Mr Hendel
> That Mr Hendel either by himself or such Correspondence as he shall think fit procure proper Voices to Sing in the Opera.
> The said Mr Hendel is empower'd to contract in the Name of the Patentees with those Voices to sing in the Opera for one Year and no more.
> That Mr Hendel engage Senezino as soon as possible to Serve the said Company and for as many Years as may be.
> That in case Mr Hendel meet with an excellent Voice of the first rate he is to Acquaint the Govr. and the Company forthwith of it and upon what Terms he or She may be had.
> That Mr Hendel from time to time Acquaint the Governor and Company with his proceedings, Send Copys of the Agreements which he makes with these Singers and obey such further Instructions as the Governor and Company shall from time to time transmit unto him.[109]

Recruiting singers was Handel's original task and the main credit for the theatre would be earned through the success of those performers. As the final preparations for the Academy's opening season came to a close he was officially nominated as "Master of Musick", taking charge of the orchestra. Surely, the conventions of *opera seria* were as good as fixed, but it is remarkable that there is hardly any evidence that the governing board was particularly involved with the creation of the music, or the poetry. They were, nonetheless, very particular about hiring singers. Conceivably, this could be a sincere effort to grant the creators artistic freedom. It implies, however, that the opera itself was of secondary significance.

A related topic concerns the use of existing music. The "re-hashing" of arias from former operas was a very common aspect of opera composition.

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[109] O. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography*, W.W. Norton and Company: New York (1954) – pp. 89-90

Sometimes, a composer was pressed by deadlines and he simply didn't have time to compose an entirely original work. Tunes which were previously successful would simply be set to different words in the new libretto and become part of the "new" opera. Consequently, the essential aspect of the opera is therefore the triumph of the singer and not the nature of the composition. Obviously, it would be hard to charm an audience with a badly written piece of music, but in effect, it was the soloist and his or her interpretation catching the spotlight, not the composition as such.

Thus, it was of extreme importance that Handel selected the right singers to build the company. The competition was fierce, and the reception of his own work depended for the most part on the talent and achievement of the artists he engaged. The Royal Academy saw many singers come and go, but the one castrato who dominated the entire period was Senesino. Arriving in 1720, he sang almost every *primo uomo* role in Handel's operas until the closing of the company in 1728. Other famous castrati, such as Berenstadt and Baldi also performed for several seasons at the Academy. Durastanti was the initial leading soprano, and later, Cuzzoni and Faustina commanded the female parts. All these singers contributed greatly to the success of the Royal Academy and the exultant victory of Handel and the *opera seria* in London. In fact, the individual singers proved such an important issue in the 1720s that Handel scholars of the twentieth century labeled them accordingly. They categorized the operas of the First Academy into three groups, namely the Senesino-Durastanti operas (1719-1723), the Senesino-Cuzzoni operas (1723-1727) and the Cuzzoni-Bordoni operas (1727-1728). These works all remained genuinely Handelian, but the level of virtuosity in the arias ascended as the years progressed. Although

Durastanti proved to be an excellent member of the troupe, Senesino was the most accomplished singer of the crew. When Cuzzoni arrived on the scene, there were two great stars of Italian opera. As Faustina Bordoni finally arrived in England, three of the most talented and skillful singers of the time gathered on the London stage. For Handel and the other composers at the Academy, this was an outstanding chance to compose music of the finest quality. Thus, London was briefly the most respected center of *opera seria* in Europe.

II.2: Music for the Castrati:
Who Should Sing the Repertoire Now?

Since castrati were the leading stars in *opera seria*, it is not surprising that Handel's operas contain much music for them. Every singer was distinctly different, which is not only natural, but is also clearly demonstrated through Handel's writing style. He was able to capture in his melodies a kind of pathos and melancholy. In addition, he was a master in writing for the "vocal acrobats" in ways that would show off the brilliance of their virtuoso technique. Of course, the exact voice quality of any one castrato at the Royal Academy cannot be traced, nor could it be for any of the other singers. The music, however, offers ideas of where the singer's forte lay, which part of his tessitura was the strongest, whether the voice was fit for dramatic and heroic parts or for the more lighter characters. Different voice types work in a certain way and every type has certain aspects that distinguish them from another type, besides its timbre. Good composers cherish these aspects and write their music accordingly. These vocally beneficial techniques range from knowing how to prepare a sustained high note, to formulating a run in a particular way and making sure there are enough places to breathe. Even the setting of the text to favor the meaning of the words can have a favorable effect on performance.

There is plenty of reason to believe that castrato voices were just as diverse in quality and temperament as voices, which developed as nature

intended. The castrati, too, had different ranges, stretching from the high soprano to a deep contralto. It seems that there were two main categories as far as vocal personality went. First, there were the virtuoso castrati, who were particularly competent in moving their voices around in elaborate runs, making use of intricate *fioriture*. Secondly, there were the ones who were exceptionally good at conveying emotions and moving the audience to tears. Some phenomenal castrati possessed the talents to excel in both, such as Senesino or Farinelli. However, the vocal sound of a castrato could not be classified as female or male, for they were neither. As people, they were considered men, as voices, one could stretch to say female. In essence, they were a completely separate class. Indicated as the "third sex", they were an isolated group as generously praised on stage as mocked in society. Their theatrical capacities reached from the heroic military roles, to royal princes and princesses, vindictive lovers, tyrants, traitors and even old women. So as much as their voices could vary, so did their stage personalities.

Since it is common knowledge that Handel always wrote his music with a specific voice in mind, it is viable to analyze the scores and detect what type of voice the castrato in question might have had. Although no contemporary voice can compare to the sound of the castrati, it is possible to construct a profile of each individual. This might shed some light on these singers, what their voices were like and why almost every Italian opera-loving nation celebrated them as the gods of operatic theatre.

In regard to castrato repertoire, there is a very important debate. During the past few decades, there have been many different opinions on how to perform this music and remain as close to baroque conventions as possible. For

obvious reasons, it is out of the question to revive the custom of castration for the purpose of voice preservation. So, who will sing the castrato's part? Merill Knapp elaborates profusely on this subject in his essay "Problems with Handel Opera".[110] He calls it one of the stickiest problems in modern day Handel opera performance.

There is sufficient reason to abjure the practice of score alteration, which entails that castrato parts be transposed down for male singers. Unfortunately, some twentieth-century editors and performers have ignored the possibility of casting high voices in the castrato parts, especially where male roles are concerned. Sometimes, even roles written for females are transposed down an octave. Table I provides a comparison of the original cast and the IMC edition cast list of the opera *Giulio Cesare.*[111]

Table I:

[110] M. J. Knapp, "Problems with Handel Opera", *Händel Jahrbüch* (1983) – pp. 32-8
[111] G. F. Handel, *Giulio Cesare*, International Music Company (1973)

Characters	Original cast (1724)	IMC Edition (1973)
Romans:		
Giulio Cesare	Alto castrato (Senesino)	Bass-baritone
Curio	Bass (Lagarde)	Bass
Cornelia	Soprano (Robinson)	Mezzo-soprano
Sesto	Soprano (Durastanti)	Tenor
Egyptians:		
Cleopatra	Soprano (Cuzzoni)	Soprano
Tolomeo	Alto castrato (Berenstadt)	Bass
Achilla	Bass (Boschi)	Bass
Noreno	Alto castrato (Bigonzi)	Bass

Four of the parts suffered a transposition down in the printed score.[112] Knapp rightfully finds that transposition does violence to the score. His chief objection is a very valid one: downward transposition often results in a vocal line that goes below the *basso continuo* line, the outcome of which creates awkward intervals and undesired chord combinations. Another objection could be that at the lower octave, the vocal line looses the brilliance it has in the high range. The vocal line risks getting lost in the rumbling of the bass section, or being drowned out by too much activity in the high parts of the orchestra. In most cases, transpositions do not work well, as not only the vocal line, but also the orchestration would need changing to accommodate a favorable accompaniment for the singer.

[112] The score for *Cornelia* was not actually altered in the IMC edition. The soprano/mezzo-soprano confusion is just a case of a slightly different idea on the technical terms.

As a happy medium, it is clear that countertenors would fit the role perfectly. However, Knapp suggests that countertenors do not have a voluminous or piercing enough sound to fill an opera house. It is easy to reject this theory. In the last two decades, the vocal technique for countertenors has been the subject of much research and pedagogues have gained considerable knowledge on the workings of this voice type. As a result, many countertenors have enjoyed great successes interpreting opera repertoire from Monteverdi to Handel. Unfortunately, countertenors do have a limited high range. The music written for a soprano castrato is simply too high for an alto voice. The male sopranos frequently sang passages above the staff and could easily maintain whole sections in the high register. This would be exhausting to any voice that is not naturally disposed to sing in this tessitura. As a natural solution, it is evident that this music should now belong to women. Moreover, in view of the ambiguities concerning gender crossing in baroque theatre, this answer is completely justifiable. Even in the glory days of castrato singing, women would sometimes perform the same roles as the eunuchs. Handel's *Radamisto*, for example, written for the opening season of the Royal Academy in 1720, saw the dramatic soprano Margherita Durastanti as the title hero during the premiere production, as *primo uomo* Senesino had not arrived yet. Later that year, the opera was revived with the castrato as the lead and Handel provided some changes in the castrato's advantage. Hence, there are no conceivable obstacles to the casting of women in castrato roles.

In consequence, an obvious question presents itself. Should these roles be classified in a *Fach*, in the same way as a *Contessa*, a *Lucia,* or a *Tosca* are? This is a much more delicate question. Baroque roles have more or less

escaped the fixed classifications. One might speculate on some reasons for that. The most convincing argument is the fact that vocal categorizing did not really become an issue proper until romantic opera was in full swing. The music composed in those days became so specifically timbre-oriented that there is no mistake as to which voice-type should be singing which role. In the romantic era, baroque opera was, except for some rare revivals, ignored. Consequently, the genre avoided confrontation with these new voice-type classifications.

Another argument relates to the issue that most roles were composed with a specific voice in mind. The composer was usually familiar with both the singer's voice and dramatic capacity and composed the music emphasizing on his forte and avoiding his weak points. On that account, if the voice was selected before the music was composed, is then the *Fach* of the role not pre-determined?

As a case study to try to determine the kind of voices some of these castrati had, it will be interesting to investigate the music of the castrati working with Handel in the Royal Academy. Since these scores were composed by such an experienced vocal composer, the strength and weaknesses of particular voices should be evident. Through role and score analysis, it might therefore be feasible to form an impression of which kind of voice these male sopranos may have possessed and how they functioned within the opera and the company. The goal of this research is to discover how the music composed for Handel's castrati may be viewed in the present and how these roles should be cast using potential singers of today.

II.3: Individual Singers

1. Francesco BERNARDI (Senesino)

Aside from the fact that he was born in Siena, there is little certainty about this castrato's early life. According to Heriot, he was born in 1680, but since his career is hardly mentioned in any documents dating from before 1709, he may well have been quite a bit younger.[113] In his first successful years, he was singing in opera houses all over Italy, but the initial indication of his international career is from 1719, when he appeared on the cast list of the Dresden court. This is where Handel heard him and convinced him to join the Royal Academy. He remained in London for seventeen years, mainly as a singer of *opera seria*. After that he returned to Tuscany and within a few years, he seems to have withdrawn from the scene, for records of him become sparse after that date. The date of his death is as obscure as that of his birth. Dean states that he passed away before January 1759.[114] However, he does not elaborate on the circumstances of the castrato's death.

Handel wrote no fewer than seventeen opera roles for this castrato alto, all of them title roles or principal parts. Thirteen of them saw their creation in London under the Royal Academy of Music. Senesino's stage personality was of

[113] Heriot - p. 91
[114] W. Dean, *New Grove Dictionary of Opera , IV* - p. 314 [entry: *Senesino*]

the heroic kind, well suited for the military and majestic characters, with a great capability to convey noble emotions and regal poise. He presumably possessed a voluminous voice, with a technical ability to execute intricate divisions and a particular talent for delivering recitatives. Quantz was especially flattering about the castrato:

> "He had a powerful, clear, equal and sweet contralto voice, with a perfect intonation and an excellent shake. His manner of singing was masterly and his elocution unrivalled. Though he never loads adagios with too many ornaments, he delivered the original and essential notes with the utmost refinement. He sang allegros with great fire, and marked rapid divisions from the chest, in an articulate and pleasing manner. His countenance was well adapted to the stage, and his action was natural and noble. To these qualities he joined a majestic figure; but his aspect and deportment were more suited to the part of a hero than a lover."[115]

The first opera to feature Senesino at the Royal Academy, was *Radamisto*. The soprano Durastanti had premiered the title role at the beginning of first season. However, Handel knew that Senesino was making his way to London soon and must certainly have had the latter's voice in mind while composing the music for this opera. When the opera was re-programmed for the next season (December 1720), Senesino took on the title role and Durastanti appeared as the female lead, Zenobia (a role originally written for the contralto, Anastasia Robinson). Handel refitted the score extensively, transposing three of the principal parts, adding a lot of new musical material and allowing some minor alterations to the plot. It is the most extensive revision to any of his operas, with the last alteration occurring in 1728. Dean and Knapp go as far as to say that the

[115] Heriot - p. 94 [Quoted from an unknown source by J. Quantz]

revised version of this opera surpasses the original, and they claim that this may well be the only one of Handel's operas for which this is the case.[116]

The changes made in Senesino's favor were transpositions, a few detailed improvements on the existing scores, some additional music and some modest alterations to the libretto. Five arias were set a third or a fourth lower, and underwent some subsequent modifications in the orchestra. The new *recitativo accompagnato*: "Perfide" replaced the existing aria "Ferite, uccidete". The new arias were "Vile! Se mi dai vita" with the preceding accompanied recitative "Vieni d'impietà", which was inserted in Act III, scene iv. These arias are in a fast 3/8 tempo, and address the enemy in a heated, provoking fashion. On both accounts, Handel provided music with long runs and suitably impressive intervals. The opening phrase of the voice part stands out unaccompanied, starting with a falling fourth. "Perfido" (I, vi) moves rapidly in a rhythmic pattern that alternates mostly dotted rhythms with long, intricate runs. The long trilled note in bars 81-85, followed by the melisma, is a technique often applied in fast arias and gives the singer a chance to show his *cresendo* and *decrescendo*. As a first attempt to create a part for Senesino's voice, Handel had some obvious knowledge of the capacities of the singer. Quantz's praising comments on the beautiful *trillo*, the fluent *passaggio* and the fiery deliverance of the fast tempi are all elements demonstrated in this aria.

For the next season, an opera called *Muzio Scevola* appeared on the program for April. The piece was a joint effort of three composers at the Academy: Amadei, Bononcini and Handel. The libretto allowed each composer

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[116] W. Dean and M. Knapp, *Handel's Operas 1704-1726*, Clarendon Press, Oxford (revised edition 1995) – p. 341

to produce one act, as well as an overture. Naturally, the three acts stood up against each other and were the subject of a direct comparison between the composers. Burney described the effort as "a premeditated plan, to try their several abilities, and determine pre-eminence".[117] Handel, who composed the third act, must have been well aware of this. He took great care to create music of high quality, making sure to implement ample diversity within the arias and between the different components of the act. There are eleven arias, two duets, a battle *sinfonia*, four accompanied recitatives and an exultant, well-crafted chorus at the end. Yet, in his effort to compose the music for Senesino, some three arias and a duet, Handel never quite achieves the same strength as in the two arias for *Radamisto*. The duet is engaging and the arias adequate, but they lack driving force, lyric imagination and dramatic weight. Due to these shortcomings, which run through the entire opera, *Muzio Scevola* has been seen as a parody on *opera seria* rather than a worthy example of the genre.

In December 1721, Handel finally had an uninterrupted opportunity to compose an entire role for Senesino. The libretto chosen for this work incorporated the dramatic story of the war-faring prince Floridante. Senesino was an obvious choice for the title role. Rolli provided the poetry in a great hurry. Handel managed to pull the opera together with some superb music, which makes up for some of the lack of intensity in the drama and characters. Dean and Knapp picture the character of Floridante as "a passive hero of a type admittedly suited to Senesino's gift for pathetic expression". They go on to describe the vast use of triple meters and triplet sections as a figuration of "a lack

[117] As quoted in Dean and Knapp – p. 370

of force in a man who has just won a naval battle".[118] LaRue, on the other hand finds in Floridante a powerful depth, which manifests itself in his radical devotion and fidelity to his lover, Elmira.[119] The title role secures six arias, one arioso and a duet. Four of those arias are indeed in a triple meter. There is an obvious argument for the fact that triple meters give a more flowing, and perhaps a less robust or masculine character to a melody. Yet, Handel may well have intended that Senesino should be portrayed as a more elegant, soft-hearted leader. He would not only have been right in writing smoothly flowing music for him, but he would also have succeeded in making a solid dramatic statement for the character through the score. In fact, this is almost certainly the case. In that light, LaRue's opinion holds ground. Besides the triple meters, both arias in double meter, "Bramo, te sola" (II, iv) and "Tacerò, ma non potrai" (II, ix), are loaded with triplets, often in long melismatic strings of notes. Moreover, only the two arias in the first act have major keys. Even the energetic, upbeat aria in which Floridante expressed his desire to be true to his beloved rather than his right to the throne, is composed in G minor ("Bramo te sola"). The opening lines of the voice part expose the main idea of the dramatic situation. Characterized by descending fourths and fifths in dotted rhythms, they introduce a promising musical concept for establishing a resolute statement. Yet the music quickly diverts back into triplet runs and smoothly rounded phrases. Handel's blatant exercise of the *siciliana* idea and the minor keys is almost certainly a communication of a deliberately painted portrait of the hero. All of Floridante's music is utterly refined. Every individual aria is a lyrical gem. However, in its

[118] Dean and Knapp – pp. 390-91
[119] LaRue – p.116

entirety as a role, Floridante risks fatiguing the audience, not only through the dramatic dearth in his character, but also due to the lack of rhythmical and melodic variety in the music.

In the season 1722-23, Handel composed a heroic opera for Senesino, called *Ottone, Rè di Germania*. The title role was similar in character to Floridante. Senesino had already enjoyed great success with his interpretation of "pathethic heroes" and Handel quickly saw this forte in the castrato's nature. Heavy pathos and passionate outbursts of tragedy were obviously well suited in Senesino's voice. This ardor also translated to his virtuoso music, which usually had an impetuous projection. Senesino's seemingly flawless technique, powerful voice and vocal flexibility were excellent tools to express a broad variety of dramatic intentions. In *Ottone*, Handel provided no less than eight arias and a duet for the castrato. One of the most interesting *scene* occurs in the third act. It is a progressive psychological unfolding of Ottone's thoughts and emotions. He discovers that his beloved, Teofane, is gone, and *Gismonda* leads him to believe that she was taken by his enemies, whom, as she confesses, she helped escape from Ottone's prison. Ottone, left alone in despair over the loss of Teofane, feels betrayed. The scene starts with an accompanied recitative ("Io son tradito", III, ii). It starts quietly, but suddenly, Ottone bursts out and summons his men to trace the escaped enemy (*Duci! Soldati!*). In a quick change back to reality, brought on by the orchestra's abrupt shift from cutting note repetitions to solid diminished chords, the betrayed one woefully curses the traitors. He then hopelessly calls out to his beloved, ending the recitative in a Bb minor cadence. The following aria "Tanti affanni" (III, ii), in F minor is labeled *Larghetto*. The atmosphere is one of mental torture, illustrated in the upper string parts by

diligent chromatic movements in ascending and descending broken chord figures. The voice part expresses lyric sadness *(Tanti affanni ho nel core, ch'il dolore a me toglie il respirar*) the phrases repeatedly end in a falling musical line. The intricate part-writing and voice-crossing of the violins symbolize Ottone's interwoven anguish, frustration and sorrow. The scene finishes with another aria, "Non a tempre per colpi si fieri" (III, ii). Ottone cries out that he knows no way of understanding savages, since he has the heart of a king. The *Largo* movement, with a sharp dotted rhythmic pattern, draws its emotional energy mainly from the violin solo. Great leaps, flashing broken chords and a nervous rhythmic sequence stand in contrast to the doleful fluidity of the voice part. The general sensation is one of intense inner distress and dolefulness. This monologue is one of Handel's best attempts at setting up a dramatic tension while disclosing the character's most inner thoughts and feelings in different stages and levels. The scene in itself is a true masterpiece. It ranks amongst the most powerful dramatic scenes in Handel repertoire and few of his contemporaries exceeded this level of emotional expression.

In the end, *Ottone* proved not to be one of Handel's masterpieces. The opera has many splendid moments, but in between the plot moves unconvincingly and the action is predictable. The opera moves from one scene to the other in a jerky way. The characters are insipid, laboring fruitlessly to hold the drama together until the curtain drops. The better tunes, however, became hugely popular, according to Burney, who was obviously not as concerned with dramatic content and congruity as with the music. He claims: "the number of songs in this opera that became national favorites, is perhaps greater than in any

other opera".[120] How much of this might be the contributed to the interpretation of the singers could be a valid point of discussion. *Ottone* was the first production including Cuzzoni as the *prima donna* in the role of Teofane. Her appearance made huge furore in England and her part in this opera "fixed her reputation as an expressive and pathetic singer".[121]

Later that year, Handel composed another opera: *Flavio, Rè de Longobardi*. This time, the castrato, Gaetano Berenstadt, took the title role for his account and Senesino appeared as Guido, a noble man seeking revenge to save the honor of his family. For this character, Handel provided four arias and a duet, a modest amount compared to Senesino's other roles. The first aria, "Bel contento" (I, iv), moves in a gentle triple beat and opens with a long note. It is a wonderful moment for the singer to sing in the *messa di voce*, combined with an opportunity to show off his *agilità*.

Another interesting aria for Senesino in this opera is "Rompi i lacci", in which Guido rejects love for vengeance, but then wonders if he can ever survive without his beloved, Emilia. The first part of this aria has a fantastic musical drive, with long runs and resolute rhythmic patterns, set in a 4/4 meter. In contrast, Handel set the more tragic poetry of the B part in a 3/8 measure and entitled it *Largo*. The orchestration emphasizes the contrast, the first part being accompanied *tutti uni sono*, the second one with a tender string quartet and a delicate oboe solo. Although arias often follow this form, it is remarkable how often they appear in Senesino's repertoire. This Italian must have had a unique

[120] Ch. Burney, *A General History of Music* (1789), ed. by F. Mercer (Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York: 1935) - Vol. II, p. 722
[121] Ibid. – p. 722

talent for conveying contrasting emotions, being able to switch from one mood to another in a dramatic and vocally convincing manner.

Giulio Cesare, composed in 1723 and premiered in February 1724, was probably Handel's most popular musical masterpiece of the first Academy period. The dramatic action revolves around two major plots: the love between Cleopatra and Caesar, and Sesto's desire to avenge the murder of his father. The cast-list registered Senesino as Giulio Cesare. The scores produced for him and for the leading soprano were equally expansive, each counting seven arias and a duet, as well as many accompanied recitatives. Burney believed that this opera found its strength in the recitatives rather than the arias. He was very flattering about the piece.[122] As far as heroic roles go, Giulio Cesare was a different type of character for Senesino. Where the previous heroes had been tragic if not pathetic (such as Radamisto or Floridante), this role was truly a conquering hero in all its aspects. Unfortunately, Handel reserved the most individual music for Cleopatra, and Caesar's score falls into the more standard compositional design of the composer's other castrato heroes.

For the end of the season 1723-24, Handel composed another great opera, called *Tamerlano*. The title role went to the castrato Pacini. Senesino was bestowed another principal role as the sensitive hero Andronico, who unfortunately falls in love with the same women as his ally Tamerlano. As a somewhat sorrowful figure, Andronico forms the liaison between the two fighting camps. Four of his arias occur as monologues, which means that he sometimes internalizes his feelings, or at other times, addresses them to the audience. The most exquisite of these is the final scene of Act I. Andronico finds himself alone,

[122] Ibid. - pp. 725-29

realizing that he must eschew his love for Asteria if he wishes to save his country from a foreign attack. As in *Ottone*, Handel thrived on these solitary scenes and obviously knew exactly how to treat them in order to create the maximum of dramatic effect. The accompanied recitative ("Chi vide mai?", I, ix) moves cautiously, with a warm, sometimes chromatic, chord-for-chord harmony in the strings. The sudden modulations and dissonance between the outer parts exemplify Andronico's sincerely tortured soul. The recitative, which is a excellent example of Handel's *accompagnato* writing, rounds off perfectly with the literal repeat of the first four measures at the end (*Chi vide mai, più sventurato amante?*). A flowing formula in a sweet, lyrical opening line and a dotted rhythm with the short *trillo* are the main aspects of the aria "Benche mi sprezzi" (I, ix). Handel blessed Andronico with some of the most superb music in the opera. He is also featured in a trio and in two duets, of which one was with Tamerlano, the other principal castrato ("Coronata di gigli e di rose", III, x).

In *Rodelinda*, Senesino starred as the *primo uomo* next to Cuzzoni, who accounted for the title role. The opera, produced in 1725, was a huge success. The action revolves around the heroine Rodelinda. Senesino's character, Bertarido, the heroine's husband, plays a less important role. Of his six arias, the three slow ones are outstanding and the fast ones leave little room for improvement. The aria "Se fiera belva ha cinto" (III, v) is a fast, impassioned aria, which would have shown Senesino's technical abilities to the teeth. However, the most remarkable moment in this opera is perhaps the beautiful duet between the two leading characters. Entitled "Io t'abbraccio" (II, vii), it is a tender moment in which Rodelinda and Andronico say goodbye to one another, gently expressing their devotion and sorrow for leaving each other. Throughout

the duet, the singers move in lyrical lines, sometimes spurring each other by leading a new musical idea or at times complimenting each other while moving simultaneously in thirds. The key change from F# minor to C# minor for the B section underlines the sadness of the occasion. The frequent repetition of the turning motif around the augmented seventh, initially led by the violins, is a charming intensification of the subtle emotions expressed in this scene.

It is noteworthy here to discuss why love duets for castrati in combination with female singers are particularly effective. The secret lies in the fact that both voices make use of the same or at the least, very close tessituras. In later opera, the tenor took over as *primo uomo*, and the duet occurred most frequently with the soprano. The scoring of the vocal lines lies, in these cases, an octave apart, and inevitably, there is a melodic distance between the two voices. In the case of the castrati, the vocal line rotates around the same pitch as that of the woman, or at the most a third to a fifth apart. This closeness of sound and tuning creates a compact ambience in the music, as if the two voices are conceived out of one unified voice. This approach becomes especially potent when the composer accommodates the voices in certain specific techniques. Ways of creating this sense of unity are, for example, the two voice lines crossing over, leaning against each other in dissonance, or taking over each other's lines in answer or completion to one another. On an analytical level, it is even possible to say that this playfulness around the same pitches symbolizes a certain near affinity between the two characters, as if the score becomes a lyrical symbol of their physical intimacy. In the case of the duet between Rodelinda and Bertarido, these intentions are very clear. The two progress together in thirds or occasionally sixths, in mostly homo-rhythmical and homo-syllabic figures. The

phrase *Io t'abbraccio* is first sung by the soprano, then repeated identically a fifth lower by the castrato, a pattern coming back in the B section. In bars 42-43, there is a clear example of how the two voices can move against each other in dissonance, which creates a sensuous tension leading up to the resolving cadence of the A part.

For the following year, 1726, Handel composed an opera called *Scipione*. The title role went to the castrato Antonio Baldi and Senesino sang the role of Lucejo. Although *Scipio* is the main character around whom the plot revolves, Lucejo evolved into a far more substantial role (he was to sing eight arias, whereas Scipio only had five, counting the *ariosi*). Handel seems to have preferred exploring Senesino's talents rather than the character in the libretto. The personality never truly develops dramatically and most of his music is, though impressive at specific instants, uninteresting. By and large, the drama and the characters never surpass the superficial. In effect, the shortcomings in the libretto took their toll in the music. The arias seem unimaginative and purposeless. The radical absence of duets and trios makes for an uninspiring opera, with hard-to-find musical unity and an angular structure, which seems to pass from one number to the other, lacking smooth musical flow and dramatic confidence.

Later that year, Handel produced his opera *Alessandro*. Senesino took the title role. He shared the stage with leading lady Cuzzoni and the newly arrived Faustina Bordoni. The opera's most interesting feature was the presence of the two competing sopranos and was the first of five operas in the so-called Cuzzoni-Bordoni cycle. The fact that this libretto features two queens competing for the love of the same man is certainly no coincidence as the two sopranos

were longstanding rivals in the professional world. The music for the two divas is exquisite, but Handel provided some magnificent tunes for Senesino as well. Standing out in particular, is the scene with the warrior chorus, “Frà le guerre” (I, v) representing Alessandro who spurs his men to battle.

With another big star on the scene, Handel saw an opportunity to play his three virtuoso singers against each other. It seems that each singer competed for the most intricate runs and longest phrases. Comparing Cuzzoni’s role to Faustina’s, it is hard to decide who had the most challenging part. Combined with Senesino’s fiery virtuosity in the same production, the audience must have marveled at all the spectacular singing. Handel selected some explicit places to give the castrato opportunities to stand out, for example in the brilliant aria “Vano amore” (II, ii). Handel made utter use of Senesino’s voice, leaping with ease over his full tessitura, writing long runs and plenty of opportunity to employ the *messa di voce*. The title role contained no less than eight arias, two duets and two choruses, by far the most substantial role in the opera. The work is a succession of great numbers for the three principals, pleasantly varied with arias for the minor characters, accompanied and *secco* recitatives, two choruses and a couple of *sinfonie*. After the dramatic mishaps with *Scipione*, Handel contrived with this opera another masterpiece and he had the some of the finest singers in Europe to promote him in the performance of it.

In 1727, the Academy produced two newly composed operas by Handel: *Admeto* and *Riccardo Primo*. In both cases, Senesino took charge of the title role. *Admeto* might well be considered the finest of the Cuzzoni-Bordoni operas. The dramatic unfolding in the plot finds its depth in the intricate love affairs between the two couples Admeto and Antigone, and Trasymede and Alceste.

While Senesino's role was substantial, with seven arias and a duet, the composer reserved the most impressive music for the two leading ladies. However, in the castrato's music, the most beautiful instant is the duet "Alma mia!" with Antigone (III, viii), in which Handel succeeds to create a distinct feeling of emotional union between the two characters.

The most exciting aspects of *Riccardo Primo* are without doubt the impressive descriptiveness of the music and the extensive instrumentation of the score. The first act opens with a spectacular storm scene, which leads into the accompanied recit "Lascia, Berardo, lasciami!" (I, i). The triumphant choruses in the third act are equally dazzling, with horns, trumpets and tympani in the orchestra and especially catchy tunes for the singers. The music provided for Senesino in this opera was probably the most challenging for him yet. He received eight arias, of which five were in a fast tempo. The aria "Agitato da fiera tempesta" (I, v) is decidedly magnificent. Yet, Handel surpassed all previous levels of virtuosity in Riccardo's aria in the third act. "All'orror delle procelle" (III, i) is an overwhelming succession of vocal maneuvers, starting with the opening line, which moves very fast runs in sixteenth notes and leaps spanning over the octave. In bar 48, on the words *cuori avvezzi in mare e in terra*, the phrase leaps from a low b to a d'', almost passing over Senesino's entire range in just three beats. Furthermore, there are a multitude of long and short trills, syllabic passages pushing the action forward at a very high speed and intricately devised melismas in the B section. The accompaniment is thick and vigorous, with oboes and violins in the top parts, and second violins and violas underneath. Of all the music Handel wrote for Senesino, this role is perhaps the best proof that the singer must have had a sizable voice. A small voice would have been lost

completely, enveloped by such compactly written accompaniment. Only a big, full voice could possibly have cut through this arrangement of unison doubling and animated sixteenth note action in the orchestra.

The following season would be the last of the Academy's short-lived glory. However, Handel managed to produce another two new operas before the theatre closed its doors. The first was *Siroe.* The production took place in February 1728. The composer used an existing libretto by Metastasio, but the drama lacked fluency and credibility. Hence many of the arias, though they are of high standing musical quality, seem out of place and elongated from the purpose of the plot. With only six characters to play, the opera features no duets, trios or choruses, and much like *Scipione*, the work moves tediously from one number to another, spurring little interest and featuring few highlights.

Tolomeo was the last opera composed for the First Academy. It ranks highly among Handel's masterpieces. The dramatic power of the libretto lends itself to many moments of intense passion and near-fatal tragedy. The plot revolves around a husband and wife, namely Tolomeo and Seleuce, separated due to an unfortunate political circumstance. The pair roams, disguised as shepherds, on the island of Cyprus, desperately in search of each other. The drama climaxes in the penultimate scene of the third act, when the grief-stricken Tolomeo attempts suicide by drinking a poison. Thankfully, the potion is not poisonous, but a mere sleeping potion. When he wakes up in the final scene, the couple is reunited. The opera concludes in a sparkling duet followed by a joyous chorus. Senesino fit the part of Tolomeo perfectly: a melancholy hero who is lost in the world, torn between love, honor and duty. The best music is certainly reserved for him, with the most exceptional moment being the suicide scene

("Inumano Fratel" and "Stille amare", III, iv). The key for the episode is Bb minor, which progresses chromatically to add to the dark mood of the piece. In the *recitativo accompagnato*, Tolomeo deplores his inhumane fate, curses the parties who put this fate upon him and justifies the reasons for his death. The phrases are short, supported by sharp, fast interventions in the orchestra. It evolves into a moving chromatic passage in which the unhappy one remembers his beloved and he sighs out his last breath to her. The aria describes the grip of death moving in on the distraught hero. It is set in a 4/4 measure and marked *Larghetto*. Handel employs a few stereotypical techniques that are very effective in this situation. The bass descends in a chromatic pattern while the violins delicately play short trills on each beat, moving the harmony per half bar. With each trill motif, the violins seem to shiver, symbolizing the chilliness of death, ready to strike. In the B section, the repetition of the word *già, già* is set as if it were truly the exasperation of a last breath. The *da capo* of the aria never finishes, as Tolomeo softly collapses into his presumed death. The juxtapositions of the emotions, frustration, love and fatal despair, make for an exceptionally dramatic setup, utterly involving the audience in the drama and soliciting compassion for the fate of the poor lover. In its intensity, it strongly reminds of the illustrious Act III scene from *Ottone*, or Bertarido's solitary scene in *Rodelinda*. Undoubtedly, Senesino must have had a talent to draw the spectators and move them to tears. Handel unmistakably recognized this. The composer would not have created scenes of such tragic heaviness if he did not believe the castrato would do the music justice.

Through the music, it becomes clear that Senesino had a limited range. In general, the arias lie within the c' to c'' range, with some escapes to a lower

register and sometimes to a higher. After hearing the castrato in *Muzio Scevola*, Burney rightfully observed that, although the English always considered Senesino a contralto, his scores were consistently written in the soprano clef.[123] He then continued to explain that as Muzio, Senesino does not appear to go lower than a c, or higher than a d.

The majority of the arias are energetic movements, with long runs and impressive jumps. Slower arias are usually with flowing rhythms, rather than in drawn-out note values (often in triple meters). Senesino's ability to excel in both technical virtuosity and emotional communication models him as the perfect romantic hero. In the military scenes, he would sing amazingly difficult arias, delivered with bold passion. In the emotional scenes, his control of the *messa di voce* would lend itself perfectly to the delicate rendition of tragic moments or tender love. LaRue labels him very aptly as the "Heroic - anti-Heroic" singer.[124]

Senesino shined in the role of the pathetic, sensitive hero. Eight of the thirteen roles written for him fit this description to some degree or more. His ability to convince in a vast array of different emotions is particularly obvious in his music. Besides Floridante, most of the roles provide contrasting arias, in which he can both show off his technical abilities and his emotional strengths. For the latter, the highlights in the compositions are most certainly the solitary scenes, in particular the ones in *Ottone*, *Rodelinda* and *Tolomeo*. These scenes suggest that Senesino's dramatic talent as an actor was equally convincing as his vocal ability. Yet, he could also play a strong hero. The chorus scene in

[123] Burney, *A General History of Music* – Vol. II, p. 713
[124] LaRue – p.105 [Chapter 5: *Senesino and the Heroic – Anti-Heroic Male Role*]

Alessandro is exemplary to that, as well as both of the newly composed arias for the revival of *Radamisto* and the Act III aria in *Riccardo Primo*.

Going back to Quantz's impression of the castrato, many of the observed issues are traceable in the score, such as the even voice, the ability to execute runs and his *trillo.*[125] Handel often writes great leaps for the singer and runs, which span almost the entire tessitura. This must indicate that Senesino had a fantastic *agilità* and an even sound over the complete range. Yet, Quantz seems to think that the castrato served better purpose as a hero than as a lover. This statement might be up for debate. Not many of the roles contain the cooing pastoral love arias often encountered in baroque opera, but the duets testify of a sweet delicacy and sensitivity in his nature. His control of the *messa di voce*, which contributed greatly to the sad and tragic monologues, would also have been equally useful expressing tenderness in a love duet.

It is clear that Senesino should be classified as a dramatic singer, as indicated by the type of roles in which he excelled and the technique necessary to perform the music. Nowadays, these roles would have to be performed by singers who, primarily, have great technical skills. A distinct facility in moving the voice up and down would be required, as well as an adequate *agilità* to sing intricately woven runs, scales and broken chords. For the heroic and military scenes, which often encompass those features, a passionate delivery of the music and a valiant presence on stage would be required. Although Senesino's range was fairly limited, Handel frequently used it comprehensively in one aria. The singer of today would have to be comfortable executing leaps, which often span an octave or more. The slow arias would appeal to singers with great

[125] See quote above (p. 88)

emotional strength in their voice. The monologue scenes are dramatically challenging, on a vocal as well as a thespian level. Moreover, the singer would need excellent breath control, for in both the fast and the slow tempi the phrases are sometimes remarkably long.

Whether Senesino's parts should be performed by a countertenor or a mezzo-soprano/contralto is of little importance. The dramatic strength and vocal expertise of the performer are much more consequential in the execution of these roles. However, the characters do vary. Roles like Floridante would be perfectly suited for women, whereas Riccardo Primo might be a more masculine endeavor. Nevertheless, female vocalists could portray a convincing hero, just as men could portray a more sensitive protagonist. Much of the dramatic delivery also depends on the physical appearance of the singer. In that respect, it would be the task of the casting director to determine whether any one person appears fit for the role.

2. Gaetano BERENSTADT

Berenstadt was the second of the "great castrati" employed at the Royal Academy. He was German by origin, but he was quite likely born in Florence around 1690. Employed by the Duke and Duchess of Tuscany, he sang productions in Florence and Bologna from a very young age. During the 1710s, worked in Düsseldorf, London and Dresden, as well as in the major Italian cities. In 1722, he returned to London to sing for the Royal Academy, where he remained for two seasons. Upon his return to Italy, he became a member of the

Neapolitan Royal Chapel. Around 1732, he started a business in books, manuscripts and paintings in Florence. He died only three years later.

Berenstadt's first appearance at the Academy was in a revival of *Floridante*. He took the role of Timante, previously performed by the castrato soprano Baldassari. Handel created one new aria for him on the text *Lascioti, oh bella, il volto*, but the piece is of little interest (the original aria on the same text was of superior quality). Handel's first role for Berenstadt was Adelberto in *Ottone* (1723). He produced for the newcomer four arias and a very short *arietta*. None of the music is particularly interesting. According to Dean and Knapp, the aria "Tu puoi strazzarmi" (I, xi) is "conventional and a short-breathed statement of defiance".[126] Perhaps Handel was just careful about composing a role for a singer he didn't know well, or he was being cautious that Berenstadt would in no way outshine *primo uomo* Senesino.

Later that season, Handel composed a title role for Berenstadt. He cast him as Flavio in the opera of the same name. The *Daily Courant* of May 14, 1723 announced the first performance, but erroneously listed Berenstadt as a bass.[127] The title role secured only three arias, but they are all congenial love songs, fitting for the character of this peaceful monarch and counselor. The aria "Starvi a canto e non languire" (III, ii), which is a distinct *gigue*, provides some opportunity for the castrato to show off his technical ability. The fast tempo, in 12/8, provides many runs, in a graceful motion. Some melismas rotate around a single note, others ascend in scale-like figures, as demonstrated in the following examples:

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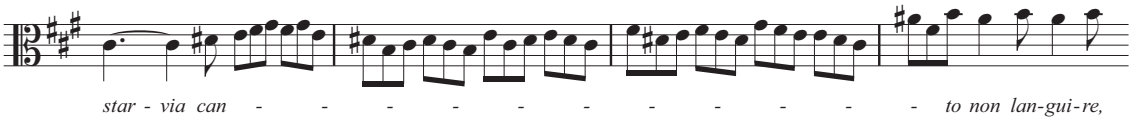
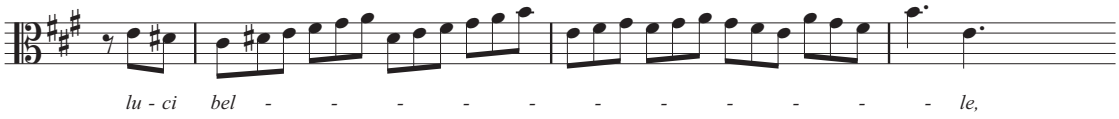
[126] Dean and Knapp – p. 430
[127] Deutsch – p. 153

Example 1.1.
Flavio, “Starvi a canto e non languire”, mm. 13-15



Example 1.2.
Flavio, “Starvi a canto e non languire”, mm. 24-28



In *Giulio Cesare*, Handel prepared the role of Tolomeo, the treacherous brother of Cleopatra, for Berenstadt. With only three arias, it is again not a substantial part. Yet, all three of the pieces are of outstanding quality. “Si spietata, il tuo rigore” (II, iv) is a C major aria in 4/4. In general, Handel paints a very dreadful picture of the tyrant, who throughout the plot seems to do nothing but scheme and force himself upon Cornelia. The theme in the beginning, which is repeated at the entrance of the vocal line, sets up a firm, angular motif. The harmony starts on a broken C major chord but moves into G major by the fourth bar. This rudimentary tonic to dominant modulation accentuates the rigid power of Tolomeo’s character. A long run in triplets follows, repeating the second portion of the same sentence (*sveglia l’odio*). Although the musical material of these two phrases is contrasting, the two supplement each other in a way that the latter reinforces the first, an element also intensified by the text repetition. The violins double the melody in the voice during the entire A section of the aria. The way Handel employs the triplets in this case is very different to, for example,

the triplet music for Floridante. Whereas the latter's phrases were rounded through the triple meter, becoming mellow and fluent, Tolomeo's aria is quite the contrary. Firstly, the tempo lies high (*Allegro, e staccato*). Secondly, the composer combines the triplet division of the beat with dotted rhythms, especially on the cadences. The phrases are therefore not delicately rounded, but finished in a vertically defined way. Moreover, the configuration of the runs is different. Handel uses them to create a forward musical drive, rather than a dulcet fluidity of the melody. The triplet figures may also suggest the scheming, snake-like mind of the character. Dean and Knapp suggest that the singer should strive to apply an adequate amount of venom in the execution of the triplets.[128] Another technique Handel employed to highlight the despotic character of *Tolomeo* lies in the structure of the cadences. Every phrase in the voice part, which leads to a cadence point, resolves on the tonic. This creates an austere, cubic structure, reflecting the contemptible perseverance of the tyrant. In general, the harmonies in this aria are basic. The modulations happen quickly and are rudimentary, venturing only to the expected neighboring keys. There are no chromatic passages, which may suggest hesitancy or emotional turbulence, or tonal ambiguities. The A section moves between C and G major, the B section starts off in A minor, progressing to E minor.

Berenstadt stayed at the Royal Academy for the duration of two seasons. His reasons for leaving might have been related to the competition he faced in London. Senesino's status at the Academy strongly reduced Berenstadt's chances of raking in a big part or a major title role. Moreoever, the *primo uomo*'s immense success with the English audience kept the German-Italian somewhat

[128] Dean and Knapp – p. 499

in the shadow. His decision to return to the European continent was probably a wise one, since Senesino remained in England and held his position in the spotlight for years to come.

Berenstadt obviously had a lower tessitura than Senesino. His arias generally exploit the a-c'' range, with an emphasis on the lower part of the voice. Although he is said to have had a sense of humor, which was unusual in castrati, his personality and appearance was of a somewhat awkward nature, or as Burney described him: "an evirato of a huge unwieldy figure".[129] This is why his roles are mostly tyrants, old men or characters of unpleasant disposition. The three Handel parts he created at the Academy were fitting to that category. In *Ottone*, he played Adelberto, the deceiving enemy of the title hero. Flavio was an old, placid monarch, and Tolomeo was a deceiving, sly colluder. The roles of young, charming lover or handsome nobleman, were out of the question. This is perhaps the prime reason why Berenstadt's music might be more fitting for a countertenor. Moreover, the tessitura lies low and often demands much force in the lower range. A male *altus* with a powerful voice would suit the parts excellently, though a deep contralto with convincing acting abilities would find a fair challenge in performing these scores as well.

[129] Burney, *A General History of Music* - p. 719

3. Antonio BALDI

Before making his way to London, Baldi sang on the Italian stage but never made a great name for himself. In 1725, he arrived at the Academy, where he stayed for three consecutive seasons, as the *secondo uomo*. Owen Swiney, who helped the Academy from 1724 until 1728 as a "foreign agent" residing in Italy, proposed to engage him. He referred to Baldi as "neither a good nor a bad singer … a tolerable actor."[130] Burney was by no means flattering about the man. In *Siroe*, he claimed that Baldi was "a singer of no great abilities." He continued that Handel took "the opportunity of rendering the composition interesting by assigning the chief part of the business to the instruments, which, so employed, were better worth hearing than the voice."[131] While Baldi was contracted, Handel composed six new operas in which he featured.

Scipione was the first opera composed featuring Baldi and he acquired the title role. None of the music composed for him is particularly interesting. The melodies are consistently uncreative and the rhythmic patterns are sequential and uneventful. Though Burney did not make the comment until much later, here too, there is a case in point for the instrumental part taking over the radiance of the piece. Especially in the third aria, "Gioja si speri" (III, vi), the vocal part never

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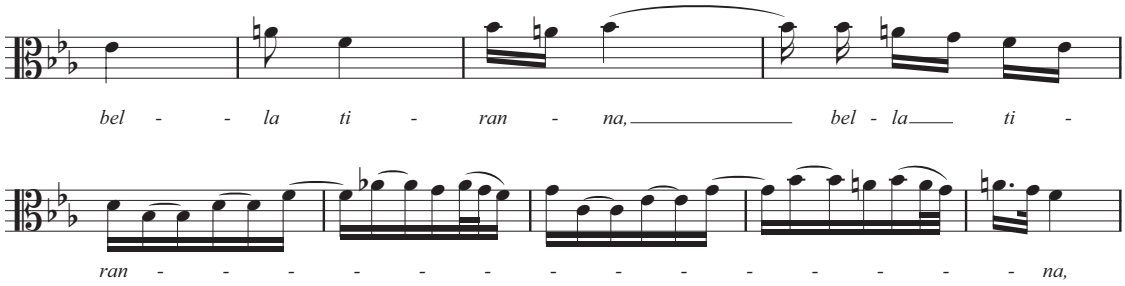
[130] As quoted in E. Gibson, "Owen Swiney and the Italian Opera in London", *Musical Times* 125 (1984) – pp. 82-6

[131] Burney, *A General History of Music* – p. 755 [It is, however, historically impossible that Burney actually heard him sing in London at the time of the *Siroe* production. His opinion was probably formed after he studied the score.]

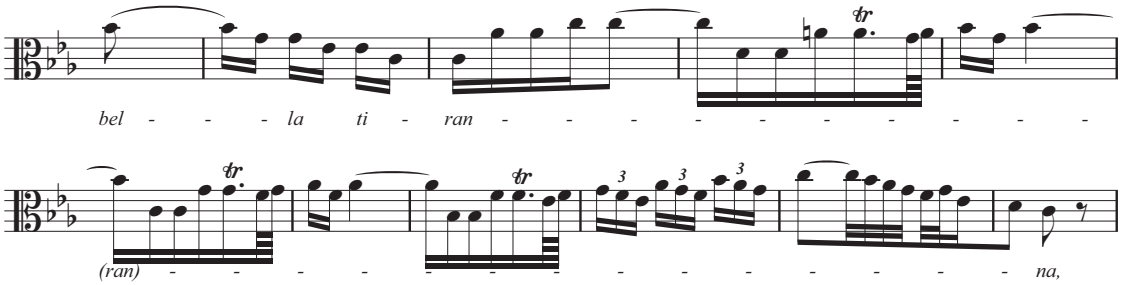
really inspires, while the violin solo is intensely virtuosic and accounts for the atmosphere of the entire piece.

In *Alessandro*, Baldi performed the role of Tassile, the king of India. He only received two arias. The first is a conventional aria with few special features. In the second, “Bella tiranna” (II, i) Baldi has a change to shine as a virtuoso, although the level of writing does not reach that of Senesino’s music. A few runs and leaps alternate with the otherwise syllabic phrases. The melismas occur most frequently on the word *tiranna*, as seen in the following examples:

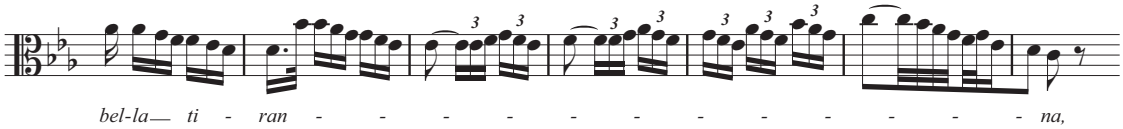
Example 2.1.
Alessandro, “Bella Tiranna”, mm. 12-20



Example 2.2.
Alessandro, “Bella Tiranna”, mm. 41-51



Example 2.3.
Alessandro, “Bella Tiranna”, mm. 61-67



The following production, *Admeto*, cast Baldi as the title hero’s brother, Trasimede. Four arias were alotted to this part and they vary in style and dramatic intention. The first, a battle aria entitled “Se l’arco avessi e i strali” (I, ix), in F major, is perhaps the most impressive. The orchestration is majestic, with horns, oboes and *tutti* strings. The melody is resolute and features some fast passages. The B section is in a contrasting style and moves into D minor. It has no orchestral parts and the vocal line moves sequentially on a sober *basso continuo* accompaniment. In the A section, the vocal line is carefully lined out, alternating with the instruments. The piece serves its purpose and though it may not be a musical highlight, it is a genuine climactic moment for the singer to excel in both his dramatic and his vocal skills.

Baldi received the role of Oronte*,* a princely lover, in the following opera *Riccardo Primo*. With only three arias, the role was again not very important. The first and the last arias are standard pieces, but the middle one is rather fascinating. It is certainly the most difficult piece Handel ever wrote for the castrato. In general, this opera contained music of very high quality for everybody. Handel did not ignore Baldi in the “virtuoso challenge”. “Dell onor di giuste imprese” (II, vi) features a variety of runs in scale figures and broken chords, as well as a multitude of trills. The orchestration is thick. It is likely that

this castrato had a decent sized voice to compete with the at times heavy instrumentation of horns, woodwinds and strings.

In *Siroe*, the opera in which Burney had especially disliked Baldi's music, the castrato received three arias. Although Burney's observation is focussed on the Act II aria, "Fra l'orror della tempesta" (II, v), his comment applied to all three pieces. If the orchestra does not dominate the musical activity, it at least doubles the voice or plays an equally meaningful part. It is clear why the second aria should have lingered in Burney's mind. Not only does the instrumental activity drive the piece, Handel chose to write this aria in a five-part *fugato* form, which further implies that the instruments are on the same level with the voice. Moreover, Burney might indeed have been right in saying Handel tried to render the composition interesting rather than make the voice stand out. On that note, the composer could have made no better decision than to write a piece with an intriguing formal structure, rather than emphasize on the melody and lyricism of the aria proper. In itself, this aria makes for a great piece, though the voice takes the least interesting part in the fugue, omitting the scale patterns, which otherwise appear in all voices.

The last opera, *Tolomeo*, in which Baldi played the role of Alessandro, only produced three arias for the *secondo uomo*. They are short and rather insipid. There are few occasions for the singer to stick out, vocally or dramatically. As in the previous opera, the most exciting musical dynamic happens in the instruments and the voice moves syllabically in rather static lines, with little *fioriture* and few moments of emotional lyricism or dramatic pulse.

Burney was probably right. The tunes written for Baldi are seldom truly inspiring, which may indicate that he was but a mediocre singer. Over the course

of three years, Handel's music for him demonstrates the high level of castrato singing in only one single aria, namely the one for Oronte in Act II of *Riccardo Primo*. The other pieces are mostly uninteresting for the voice, but feature some beautiful instrumental passages. Because of this, he was probably an adequate musician. Handel obviously trusted him enough to sing arias that often feature him in combination with intricate instrumental parts, such as the *fugato* aria in *Siroe*. Perhaps he was more of a chamber singer than a flamboyant dramatic artist. His range was similar to that of Berenstadt or Pacini (see below), from b to d''. It is hard to establish whether his sound was large or not, but because of the combination with the instruments, it is viable to accept that it may have been of considerable size.

Another aspect of Baldi's career, which might support Burney's observation on the castrato, is the fact that he remained at the Royal Academy for three seasons, the longest of all the castrati apart from Senesino. His position was that of *secondo uomo*. All other male altos or sopranos hired for this job moved on within one or two years. The huge competition of *primo uomo* Senesino obviously did not bother him, whereas it might well have been a reason for other singers to look for further engagements where they might have more opportunity to advance. One might speculate that this post at the Academy was the best Baldi had ever had, or at least, better than anything he thought he could obtain elsewhere.

The singer tackling these roles today should foremost be an excellent interpreter with a great musical imagination. The lack of melodic drive and lyric inspiration in the music does not lend itself to an effortless, or natural, interpretation. Perhaps some creative ornamentation may render the pieces

more interesting. As far as range goes, a countertenor or a mezzo-soprano would have no problems with the score. The characters encompass anything from a princely lover to royal or military figures, but since their dramatic development never reaches concrete levels, it is of little consequence whether a male or female singer realizes these roles. In this case, it is probably most important that a sensible decision is made in relation to the other singers. Though the present day performer should have a certain technical ability, it is clear that Handel never meant Baldi to radiate as a star soloist. Of course, this may simply have been due to the fact that the castrato was unable to carry out such a part. The truly great singers, who prove themselves as distinguished thespians as well as virtuoso singers, may well be best reserved for the parts written for Senesino or other prominent castrati.

4. Benedetto BALDASSARI (Benedetti)

Baldassari was the first castrato engaged for the Royal Academy, making his debut with the role Fraarte in *Radamisto*. He also sang the role of *Timante* in *Floridante*. With Matteo Berselli, he was one of the only two male sopranos Handel invited to London during the period 1720-1728. The castrato stayed in London only for the two first seasons. The *Daily Courant* incorrectly lists him for both productions as a tenor.[132] This is especially startling since the castrato had performed with great success in London before and should have been a known figure.

[132] Deutsch – pp. 104 and 130

There is little information on his relationship with Handel or with the original company. The fact that he was not included in the production of *Muzio Scevola* is surprising. Ultimately, his motivation for leaving London is unknown. The only reference to his personality appears in the anecdote involving his initial engagement and first casting. His role in *Radamisto* called for a captain of the guard, but the castrato, who thought this character far beneath him, petitioned to have the character list altered. The singer allegedly stated "that he had never acted any thing, in any other Opera, below the character of a sovereign; or, at least, a Prince of the Blood".[133] The Academy's governing board responded to his complaint, which was presented to them through a third party. They made out orders to alter the script and the captain changed into a prince.[134]

In *Radamisto*, Baldassari sang four arias. Handel took particular care to keep the level of composition the same for the primary and secondary roles. The style of the arias varies, giving the singer several chances to show different aspects of his vocal and dramatic competence. The first aria, "Mirerò quel vago volto" (I, x), stands out as one of the prime examples in Handel's love-song writing. The scene presents Fraarte reminiscing his love for Zenobia, dreaming about conquering her heart. In a smooth 3/8 beat, the aria plays with inventive musical sentences, occasional trills, meaningful sequences and melodious runs. The accompaniment employs strings and woodwinds. It sometimes leaves the singer to sing solo, but at other times, it plays along, doubling the voice line, or

[133] Deutsch – p. 101

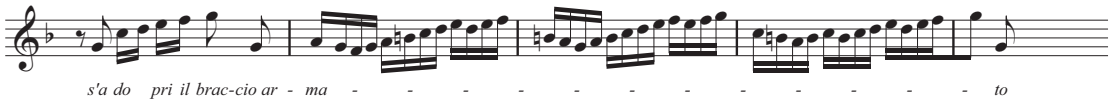
[134] Verified in Dean and Knapp – p. 338 [Taken from a letter dated March 9th, 1720, of which the authorship is attributed to Dr. Arbuthnot (he signed the letter *Musidorus*). It is addressed to the auditor-general of the Academy, Sir John Edgar. Deutsch only prints the first portion of this letter.]

progresses in duet. The liveliness in the orchestra suggests that the singer could easily cut through a dense instrumental activity. Therefore, he likely possessed a voice of substantial size.

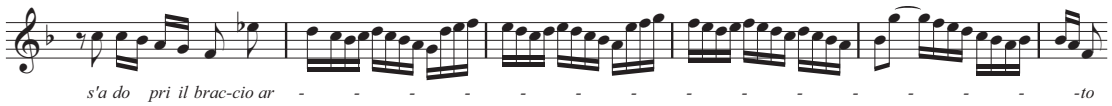
The setting of the words in “Mirerò quell vago volto” is exceptional. Occurring most frequently on the phrase *vincerò quella beltà*, the text creates a rhythmic pattern, which combines two bars into one rhythmic cell, clearly insinuating the *hemiola* concept. The effect of melodic, rhythmic and textual suspension creates a certain sensual, almost flirting atmosphere in the piece, especially when the phrase spins out with a fluid run, illustrating the word *beltà*.

In the last aria, “S’adopri il braccio armato” (III, i) Baldassari received a chance to show off his technical abilities. The aria is perhaps the least exceptional, but it does give a decent idea of the castrato’s vocal *agilità.* The runs are extensive, and often combine long held notes with scale-like figures and great leaps, as shown in these examples:

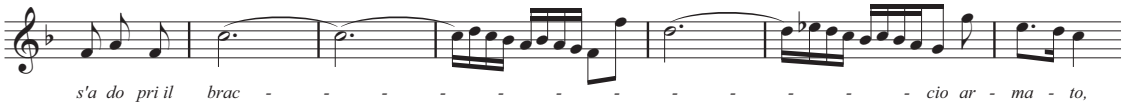
Example 3.1.
Radamisto, “S’adopri il braccio armato”, mm. 18-22



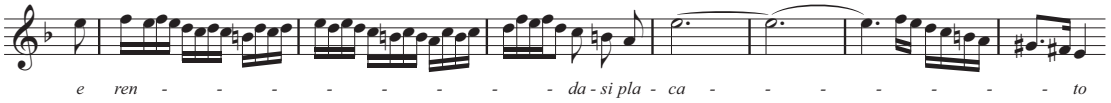
Exampe 3.2.
Radamisto, “S’adopri il braccio armato”, mm. 26-31



Example 3.3.
Radamisto, “S’adopri il braccio armato”, mm. 37-43



Example 3.4.
Radamisto, “S’adopri il braccio armato”, mm. 57-64



The instrumental accompaniment is particularly active on the long notes, which may suggest that Baldassari had no problems competing with the orchestra.

In the opera *Floridante*, Handel prepared the role of Timante for Baldassari. The part encompassed four arias and a duet. The duet, entitled “Fuor di periglio” (II, vi) is interesting because it is the only one Handel wrote at the Academy for a combination of male and female soprano. However, it is musically quite tedious. It receives its beauty through the delicately constructed instrumental accompaniment, rather than the union of the voices. The three arias are all surprisingly short and lack the musical impulse Handel had achieved

in the arias for Fraarte. Not one occasion exists for the singer to demonstrate virtuoso aptitude, and the sentimental pieces are often static, following the vertical line of the harmony, instead of leading the melody. Too many sequences and a generally syllabic setting of the text render the part uninteresting. Dramatically, Timante comes to life in his one musical highlight. The aria "Lascioti, oh bella" (II, i) moves at a gentle *siciliana* pace. Yet, the melody often takes great leaps, which takes away from the fluidity of the vocal line. It seems that in this opera Handel reserved the virtuosity for the women's parts, and the emotional depth for the leading man, Senesino.

Baldassari had made his fame especially in female roles while working for theatres in Düsseldorf, Rome and Venice during the 1710s, yet he never performed as a female in a Handel opera. In fact, Handel never cast a castrato in a female role at all. This may hint to the fact that perhaps he did not favor the practice, though he did frequently cast women in male parts. On the other hand, Baldassari might simply not have been a convincing hero. There are, in fact, three reasons to strengthen that supposition. Firstly, the history of his career implies that his forte lay in the cross-dressing roles. This prompts the idea that he might have had a dramatic inclination to act the sentimentally delicate roles, rather than the heroic ones. More evidence might be found in his request to be excused from playing a military character in *Radamisto* and that this role should be replaced by a romantic prince. This, too, insinuates that his proclivity favored the emotionally touching roles over the robust ones. The third one is perhaps the most convincing argument and it applies to a choice Handel made for his first opera at the Academy. Although Baldassari was available, the composer chose for the two male protagonists in *Radamisto* to be sung by women. Margarita

Durastanti took the title role, Catterina Galerati the role of Radamisto's enemy's ally, Tigrane. As a dramatic soprano, Durastanti was an obvious choice in the part of the hero, especially since she was already accustomed to playing pants roles. Handel must have considered Baldassari unfit to portray this dramatically demanding role. Galerati, too, was a soprano and her role entailed a strong military enticement as well. In eighteenth-century *opera seria,* one usually expected to have a castrato amongst the principal singers, particularly when one was available. Handel obviously had good reason to refrain from casting Baldassari in any of these typified roles. Dean suggests that Handel probably did not see the singer as a front-rank castrato.[135] This may be a valid addition to the arguments above. Presumably, the singer's dramatic ability, most likely in combination with his vocal timbre, stretched only to the extent of playing the sentimental lover parts.

With this in mind, it is reasonable to suggest that Baldassari's music would be well suited for a lighter soprano voice. His range in Handel's operas was limited, never reaching higher than a'', and rarely descending below e'. The dramatic stress strongly benefits the emotional and sentimental characters and the music propels on a sweet lyric-melodic course, although two of Fraarte's arias in *Radamisto* do ask for a distinguished technical competence. In the latter case, the orchestra is at times busy and rich in texture, especially in the high instruments, which often play in the same tessitura as the voice. The soprano performing these roles should have a voice with a clear, poignant quality to it, so she is able to soar through the accompaniment.

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[135] W. Dean, *New Grove Dictionary of Opera, I* - p. 285 [entry: *Baldassari, Benedetto*]

5. Matteo BERSELLI

> "Je suis icy à attendre que les engagements de S*i*nesino, Berselli, et Guizzardi, soyent finis, et que ces Messieurs d'ailleurs bien disposés, s'engagent avec moy pour la Grande Bretagne. Tout sera decidé en quelques jours; j'ay des bonnes esperances, et dés que j'auray conclû quelque chose de réel, je Vous l'ecrirai, My Lord, comme a mon bienfaiteur, a mon Protecteur."[136]

Berselli was one of the singers that Handel contracted during his stay in Dresden, where the castrato worked from 1717 until 1720. Previously, he had made a name for himself in Venice, Bologna, Rome and Naples. He sang with the Academy for one season (1720-1721), making his debut in a female role to an opera by Bononcini. His first appearance in a Handel opera was during the first season revival of *Radamisto*. The *Daily Courant* correctly announced him in the cast as the prince Tigrane, but he was listed as a tenor, not a castrato soprano.[137] Handel composed four completely new arias for the castrato and left only one of the existing arias ("La sorte, il ciel", II, vii). The aria that is vocally the most interesting ("Vuol ch'io serva", II, ii) unfortunately takes a great toll on the fluency of the drama. Dean and Knapp reckon that the entire expansion of Tigrane's music was a bad move on Handel's part and one of the few weak points of the first revision.[138] The composer obviously took great interest in the vocal qualities of the newcomer, as this aria demonstrates. It is a G major aria in a fast 3/4 measure. It starts with a long instrumental introduction, boasting a few

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[136] In a letter from Handel to the Earl of Burlington, dated Dresden, 15th July 1719. Deutsch – p. 93 [transl.: "I am waiting here for the engagements of Sinesino, Berselli and Guizzardi to be concluded for these gentlemen (who are, I may add, favourably disposed) to sign contracts with me for Great Britain. Everything will be decided in a few days' time; I have good hopes, and as soon as I have concluded something definite, I shall inform you, My Lord, as my benefactor and Patron".]

[137] Deutsch - p. 119

[138] Dean and Knapp – p. 342

distinctive features. The initial theme is in binary rhythms played by the *tutti* violins, with a sober accompaniment of the lower strings. It follows a descending figure in sixteenth notes followed by an octave leap. A triplet idea, later taken over by the voice part, contrasts the introductory phrase. The general idea is very lively and provides for a great aria. The vocal line starts with a dropping figure on the second beat (*Vuol ch'io serva*). This feature comes back at every major entry of the voice part. This idea repeats for the second part of the first line in the text (*amor la bella*). The second phrase progresses to D major and leaps over a high b'' to the cadence. The text then returns, but reverses the melodic structures to a rising figure, revolving between c'' and g'', articulating the rest of the textual phrase. A brief interjection of triplets announces the material for the melismatic passages to follow. The runs on *salva* are noticeably virtuosic. They follow note-revolving designs in triplets and take great leaps, using the high tessitura abundantly. The B section follows the same notions, but makes use of the relative minor key. Although the aria is not one of Handel's prominent showpieces, it makes for a charming tune with many opportunities for Berselli to impress the English audience.

In the third act of *Muzio Scevola*, Handel provided one aria and a duet for the Italian castrato soprano. He took on the role of Orazio, the truthful lover of Clelia. There was only one aria provided for him, and a love duet. The aria is straightforward and sequential, but in many ways captivating. Burney had particularly fine comments on the piece, calling it "the most pleasing and agreeable of all Handel's charming *Sicilianas*".[139] He does not explore the high ranges as much as he had done in the aria for Tigrane, but the music retains its

[139] Burney, *A General History of Music* – p. 741

challenging character. The duet stays in the same scope, with the part of Clelia, sung by a female contralto, floating underneath the castrato's range. Burney also comments on the relationship between Berselli and Handel. He observed: "this singer must have been high in the composer's favour of taste, as he is left to himself in no less than six *ad libitums* and *adagios*, which he had to embellish".[140]

Although the score demonstrates an obvious *agilità* in the voice, Berselli's most striking vocal feature is certainly his range. In Handel's operas, the score travels between e' and b'', but according to Quantz, his complete range spanned from c' to f'''.[141] It is obvious that because of the range, these arias do not fit in the countertenor repertoire. A female soprano with solid high notes and an adequate competence to sing runs would be an obvious choice. The roles in these operas are both lovers of noble descent and the dramatic emphasis lies on their sentimental subtlety rather than passionate vigor. Due to the characters' overall emotional temperament, a lyric soprano with a warm timbre would perhaps be more favorable choice than a high voice with a piercing sound.

6. Andrea PACINI (Il Lucchesino)

Born in Lucca around 1690, Pacini commenced his career in 1708 in Venice, starring in an opera by Albinoni. Subsequently, he sang all over Italy and enjoyed great success. In 1724, the Royal Academy hired him, but he remained there only one season. Handel immediately cast him in the title role of his opera

[140] Ibid. – p. 741
[141] As quoted by Dean, *New Grove Dictionary of Opera, I* - p. 477

Tamerlano and he also created the role of Unolfo in *Rodelinda*. His arrival caused much excitement, as the singer obviously made a good first impression. In a letter, dated October 31, 1724, Lady Bristol wrote to her husband: "the new man takes extremely".[142] The castrato moved back to Italy after one season. Again, it is plausible to speculate that Senesino's steady post proved too hard to challenge. Pacini had already built an extensive career in Italy, and the prospect of a prolonged post as *secondo uomo* might have been beneath him. He returned to his home country and performed in theatre for a long time after that. He died in March 1764, but besides the fact that he became a priest, little is known about the last years of his life.

Tamerlano featured Pacini in four arias, two duets and a trio, which is substantial for a *secondo uomo* (though Tamerlano was the title role, Senesino, who sang Andronico, featured as the male lead, with seven arias and a duet). The four arias are very different in style, in spite of the fact that they are all labeled *Allegro*. The first, "Vo' dar pace a un' alma altiera" (I, ii) consists of forthright rhythms in a 3/4 measure, contrasted with a triplet figure, which provides the musical material for some drawn-out runs on the word *furore*. Yet, to introduce the character of this supposed villainous tyrant, the aria is rather tepid and never exploits the potential depth of the drama. "Dammi pace" (I, iv), is an exquisitely beautiful tune, with a plaintive melody that lingers in the ear. The peaked *gavotte* aria "Bella gara" (II, i) has a stout, forward moving melody and long melismas in dotted rhythms on the words *coronati* and *gara*. With the last aria, "A dispetto" (III, iii), Handel sought to explore the technical abilities of this Italian. It is a vigorous aria with a multitude of very difficult runs. The violins

[142] Deutsch – p. 174

add to the energetic atmosphere of this piece with an equally animated accompaniment. The runs are formed in all shapes and sizes; some are broken chords, some scales, and others move around with great leaps. Handel also inserted long held notes, trills and he uses the entire scope of Pacini's tessitura, which reached comfortably from a to e''. This aria sparks with power and rage and aptly paints the nature of Tamerlano as blustering and vicious. Unfortunately, it is the only aria that succeeds in doing this. This accounts partly for the puny constitution of the dramatic character.

The most interesting moment for the castrato was undoubtedly the duet with Andronico. The piece in itself is not a creative highlight as far as a musical composition goes, but it is special in terms of being one of the rare occasions where Handel put two castrati in duet. The key is F major, which modulates to C and G major; the B section is in D minor, with a modulation to A minor. The tempo is moderate in a 4/4 beat and allows for a sparkling violin solo. The text describes the triumph of good over evil, rendering peace to all subjecting to love.

Duet: *Coronata di gigli e di rose*
Con gli amori ritorni la pace
E frà mille facelle amorose,
Perda i lampi dell'odio la face.

The two voices first alternate between each other, repeating the same melody and emphasizing the text. They proceed to exchange musical figures in duet, repeating each other's music in a canon-like structure, leading up to a cadence in C major. The A section continues in that fashion and concludes in an attractive passage, which accommodates the same words in both parts in a homo-

rhythmical structure. The voices progress mostly in thirds and take the upper-lying part in turn. The technical execution of the score should be in dotted note values, following the written example of the violin solo. The B section, which omits the violin accompaniment, should contrast that pattern and be performed as written.

Tamerlano is not always dramatically convincing in his arias. He chiefly lives his personality through the recitatives, which are compelling. The aria in the third act contributes to his dramatic credit and so does his responsibility in the trio. In the latter, his part stands out with vehement jumps and impassioned runs, suggestive of the afflictions of a slighted ruler. The music of the other characters floats along in extended, melancholic phrases. Dean and Knapp suggest that Pacini had not inspired Handel as a singer, resulting in arias that never fully exploit the true possibilities of the castrato. However, they also observe that the plot refrains from characterizing him as a wicked despot. He is believable as a dominant conqueror in certain moments, but he sinks back too often in mellow affairs of the heart and compromising consents with opponent parties.[143]

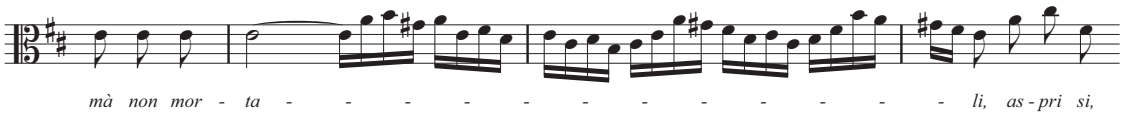
In *Rodelinda*, the role of Unolfo received three arias, one in each act. As in the Act III aria for *Tamerlano*, Handel went out of his way to give the singer plenty of opportunity to shine. The first two arias are fast, with plenty of runs and leaps. The third is a more dulcet piece, but still features many melismas and long phrases with plenty of expressive twists and turns in the melody. The three arias have in common that they have thick, busy accompaniments. The last one, “Un zeffiretto spirò” (III, i) even features a charming *obbligato* part for the cellos and bassoons, which culminates in a cello-voice duet in the B section. The first

[143] Dean and Knapp – p. 551

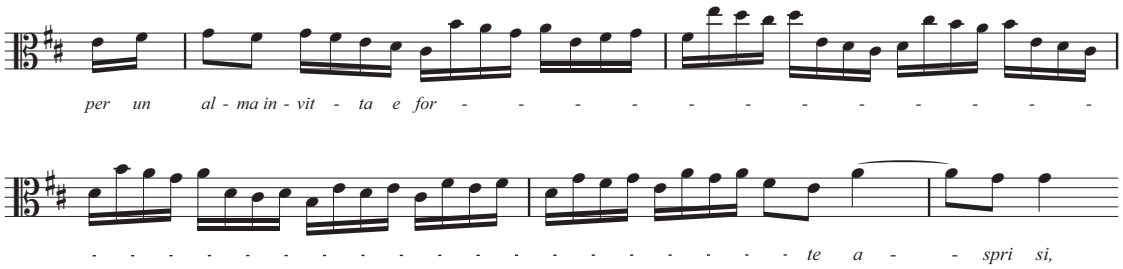
word, *zefiretto*, launches the idea for the entire piece and Handel skillfully works the intricate instrumental part as well as the vocal line to illustrate this idea. This gesture is reinforced with trills on long notes, brisk pick-ups to the beat and leaps, which exemplifies airiness and creates a sprightly, sheer texture. The aria is a true gem, with multiple *ritornelli*, inventive instrumentation and many pleasantly surprising turns.

The most vocally impressive aria is probably the first one, “Sono i colpi della sorte” (I, x). It is a model piece of a contest between the voice and the violins and a trophy of Pacini’s technical agility. The aria ranks Senesino’s music as far as the level of virtuosity goes. The runs are long, intricately constructed and varied in their contours. They appear on the text *per un’ alma invita e forte*, and on *mà non mortali*, as illustrated in the examples below:

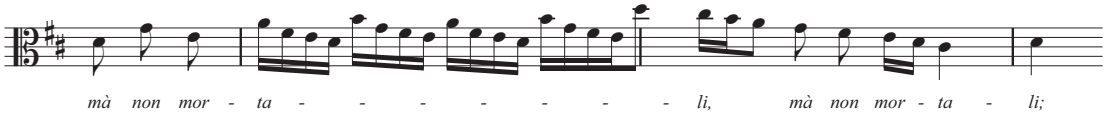
Example 4.1.
Rodelinda, ”Sono I colpi della sorte”, mm. 15-19



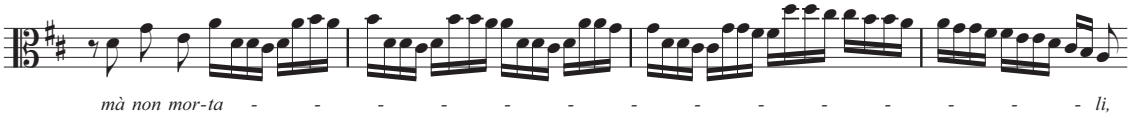
Example 4.2.
Rodelinda, “Sono I colpi della sorte”, mm. 23-28



Example 4.3.
Rodelinda, “Sono I colpi della sorte”, mm. 37-43



Example 4.4.
Rodelinda, “Sono I colpi della sorte”, mm. 37-40



The B section of this aria is short and syllabic. Though it makes for good contrast, its brevity and haste to get through the text lead to a lack of lyrical development. The result is an aria of slight disproportion and disappointing form. In general, Unolfo is an agreeable character, ever dedicated to his loyalty for Bertarido. In his music, it is this noble virtue that is accentuated and although the role is not extensive, the tunes are beautiful and make for some exquisite moments in this superb opera.

It is surprising that Burney thought Handel did not favor Pacini since almost every aria he wrote for the singer is of excellent quality. There are few static moments and many of the melodies are truly enchanting, for example the second aria for Tamerlano and the *zefiretto* aria in *Rodelinda*. Certainly, Handel had appreciation for this singer's technical and musical ability. He granted copious opportunities for the singer to excel, in both emotional drama and vocal technique.

Today, either a countertenor or a woman could do justice to this singer's profile. The voice was deep, comparable to that of Gaetano Berenstadt, Pacini's predecessor. His vocal *facilità* allowed him to sing both legato moments for the emotional passages, or fast moving runs for the more impassioned ones. A female contralto with a warm deep range, or a countertenor, would both be appropriate choices to cast in these roles. It seems, however, that Handel looked upon Pacini as the "lover"-type, rather than the "hero", to apply Quantz's criteria. At least, so much is clear from the way he treats the characterization of Tamerlano. As Winton and Dean claim, the dramatic development in these arias lacks determination.[144] Although the libretto failed to lend itself to the display of a

[144] Dean and Knapp – p. 551

stalwart character, Handel did not, at first sight, seek to add much dramatic weight to the arias. However, he compensated for that in the recitatives, which sustain the dramatic progression for the title hero. There is reason to believe, therefore, that Pacini was a persuasive actor, as his thespian talents might have been more prominent in the deliverance of the word than in vocally challenging expression. However, this may just be a wild speculation, as his role in *Rodelinda* follows this idea to a much lesser extent. In any case, the present day performer of these roles must have a good ability to convey sentimental and emotionally laden music, as well as master a solid technique to satisfy in the scenes with the more vocally ambitious score.

7. Giuseppe BIGONZI

Of all the castrati at the Royal Academy, Bigonzi was probably the least memorable. Having made a career for himself in Venice, he stayed in London only for one season, making his debut in Ariosto's *Vespasiano* at the King's Theatre in 1724. He only sang in one of Handel's operas, *Giulio Cesare*, in the minor role of Nireno, a wise man at the Egyptian court. The role is of purely dramatic use in the plot. Nireno appeared in a fair number of recitatives, but secured no arias. Consequently, it is impossible to determine the quality or nature of Bigonzi's voice based upon such little information. One would have to look to more music and turn to other composers to form a reliable idea.

According to Dean, however, the castrato made little mark in spite of the fact that he was considerably active in Venice for nearly fifteen years.[145]

[145] Dean, *New Grove Dictionary of Opera, I* - p. 472 [entry: *Bigonzi, Giuseppi*]

Conclusion

The fact that Handel employed only two soprano castrati at the Academy, Baldassari and Berselli, is an interesting issue. This is, however, not an argument for declaring that high castrati automatically had less competent voices. Handel had great admiration for singers such as Farinelli and Cafarelli, who were both high sopranos. However, in connection to this manifest choice, there is an important question to be answered, which may defend Handel's alleged preference. What was the main difference between the vocal timbre of male altos and sopranos and could this have had an effect on the roles Handel selected for them? If castrato voices matured in a similar way to female voices, then their vocal color could be as diverse as that of women. If they evolved like a normal voice, then lower voices, mezzo-sopranos and contraltos, had more dramatic intensity than the high sopranos. This is simply due to the fact that lower voices generally possess a darker and richer timbre. These voices are certainly more likely to sing dramatic roles, augmenting the emotional weight of the performance. They are also, by nature, more likely to have greater volume, which is beneficial in, for example, military or other imposing scenes, as the sheer size of the voice will add to the dramatic impact of the moment. In the more pathetic music, the dark tone of the sound may also have an increased emotionally penetrable effect. The choice of the dramatic Margarita Durastanti as Radamisto over the lyric soprano Baldassari is a representative example.

Handel seems to have preferred to cast altos, who possessed a darker voice, in the heroic roles. Moreover, soprano castrati were often prolific in cross-dressing roles. Since Handel never showed interest in this practice, he was perhaps disinclined to employ the high male voices. Against this argument, however, there is some castrato soprano music in Handel's later opera compositions, notably due to the availability of the famous Cafarelli.

If the hypothesis of diversity in vocal color is true, then the repertoire of the castrati in relation to operatic *Fach* becomes an urgent topic of debate. In other words, if castrato voices evolved in as many different colors and intensities as normal voices do, then the need to classify these roles is a valid issue. This does not mean that castrato voices equaled the sound of their female colleagues, but for the sake of present-day performance, the individuality of each castrato's voice and dramatic personality is a necessary point of discussion. It also readdresses the fact that roles composed for individual voices are pre-determined in their *Fach.* The entire course of Handel's writing for Senesino is proof of that. On the relationship between this castrato and the composer, LaRue states "by allowing the singer's strengths to influence musico-dramatic features of individual arias, Senesino was able to sing a wide range of roles, each of which would encompass a variety of aria types suited on the local level to the dramatic context at hand".[146] This incisive statement wraps up the discussion in a nutshell. Handel intentionally created these roles for a distinct voice-type and probably applied the same judgment to most of his other singers. In other words, he did not expect every singer to be able to perform what he wrote. Instead, he carefully planned the score, on a musical as well as a dramatic level,

[146] LaRue – p. 121

to suit the voice in question. This specific intention should be respected in present day performance.

Clearly, Senesino's voice equaled that of a dramatic mezzo. Baldassari was probably a lyric soprano, Berenstadt a voluminous contralto and Pacini had, very likely, a more lyrical, warm alto voice. To date, countertenors and women have not explored this repertoire enough. Too often, opera companies fall back on nineteenth and twentieth century conventions. Considerable progress has been made by many scholars and performers who make it their mission to change this prejudice. Yet there is still a certain reluctance to cast a woman as a "male lead", notwithstanding isolated cases, such as Orfeo in Gluck's opera of that name. The small number of castrato roles that have been deemed acceptable to women is far too small.

One evident aspect of singing castrato repertory today is that performers would benefit from having a big voice. The scores for the castrati often demonstrate large orchestral accompaniment, which demands a cutting, voluminous sound to complement the ensemble. Moreover, the theatres in which the castrati sang were not small halls. The Abbé Coyer described the San Carlo theatre in Naples as "a building of terrifying size, height and magnificence".[147] To carry through a theatre of so-called "magnificent size", a singer must have a voice of considerable size. Another argument in favor of big voices for baroque opera lies in the organization of the orchestra. In the grand theatres, the orchestras were quite large. Handel's orchestra at the Royal Academy reportedly incorporated 24 violins, 2 harpsichords, 1 archlute, 3 cellos, 2 double basses, and occasional flutes and trumpets. It was Mr. Fougeroux, a Frenchman

[147] As quoted in Barbier– p. 64

who traveled extensively in England, who made this observation in 1728. However, he forgot to report the oboes and horns, and he never made mention of any violas, although he may have counted those in with the violins.[148] It is clear that during the orchestra's *tutti* passages, which frequently occur in Handel's arias, a small voice would not pass over the sound of that large a group of instruments. It is therefore important to change the misconception that large or dramatic voices have no place in baroque opera. This applies not only to castrato roles, but holds ground in all opera repertoire of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Moreover, and especially applicable in the roles written for castrati, there is a definite need for dramatic voices to perform certain baroque roles. It is significant to note that singing music of any period in time is not only about "the appropriate voice", but also about "the appropriate style". There is no such thing as the alleged "baroque voice". This is a myth that was unfortunately established by the initial revivers of baroque music in the 1960s and 70s. Though the quality of their sound is not under discussion, the prominent voices in this rekindling group did somehow, probably unintentionally, establish a uniformity for what baroque singing should simulate. The work of these baroque pioneers is, however, highly admirable and of immense consequence to performance practice today. In brief detail, the main vocal aspects referred to here are the so-called "flute-sound", which finds its roots in the English boy-choir sound, a decreased use of the natural vibrato, a stress on note-execution over dramatic expression and to a certain extent, the mellow sound of the first

[148] Reported in Dean, "A French Traveler's View of Handel's Operas", *Music & Letters* 55 (1974)

countertenors. Although there is repertoire that is suited to these timbres, plenty of baroque roles ask for a fuller, more dramatic sound.

The issue that arises most frequently with the audience during performances featuring high voices in the castrato parts has its origin in the recognition of nineteenth century attitudes. Listeners often make the comment that they miss hearing low voices and they argue that the lack of variety in the vocal ranges becomes tedious. Another "problem" is the matter of romantic relations between characters of the same physical sex. There is an explicit unease concerning the woman-to-woman association on stage. In operas such as Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Cherubino*'s love for the *Countess* is tolerated, even found charming and amusing, but only because he is young, frivolous and portrays a *buffo* character, rather than a serious one. The enjoyment the baroque audience drew out of the cross-dressing roles and their fascination with sexual ambiguity in theatre has not yet found a place in modern day operatic taste and etiquette. This is most intriguing as many serious artists in popular music openly play on sexual ambiguity. Popular falsetto singers, such as the late Freddy Mercury or Prince, are good examples of induced vocal ambiguity. Boy George, who was a huge star in the 80s, enjoyed the act of cross-dressing and female make-up. Women performers, such as Annie Lennox in the late 80s and early 90s, often appeared on stage wearing a three-piece suit and tie. The audience listening to popular music is completely intrigued by this ambiguity. They find it mysterious, "cool" and even sexually attractive, much in the same way as the castrati affected the audience during the Baroque.

Though the castrati were "men", for the sake of musical appropriateness today, castrato roles need to be sung by women or countertenors. The custom

of adaptation for low male voices does irreparable harm to the harmonic and melodic sense of the music. If baroque *opera seria* were consistently performed in the correct vocal tessituras, the audience's expectations would probably soon adjust. With time, their vision of baroque opera would change and would be different from seeing an opera by, say Verdi, Puccini or Wagner.

As mentioned before, for obvious reasons, it is not acceptable to restore the custom of castration in order to reconstruct the music written for these extraordinary singers. In the past two decades, music scholars, for instance John Rosselli and Patrick Barbier, have tried to break the taboo surrounding castrati, writing about both the repertory and the history of these extinct vocalists. Their work has made considerable impact. Many prestigious baroque music conductors such as William Christie and René Jacobs have worked hard towards changing the audience's view of seventeenth and eighteenth century opera. They have achieved magnificent results with productions that both honor the composer's original intentions and the dramatic conditions. At the end of the day, it is but a small step from having men act women's roles in the Baroque to having women act men's roles today.

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